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George Cossins

THE WINGS OF SILENCE

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THE WINGS OF SILENCE

An Australian Tale

BY

GEORGE COSSINS

AUTHOR OF 'ISBAN ISRAEL'

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CONTENTS

BOOK I

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	AN AUSTRALIAN DESERT	1
II.	IN WHICH IS GIVEN THE HISTORY OF DONALD McINTYRE	17
III.	THE DESERT BEYOND INGELAPPA	39
IV.	THE OASIS	55
V.	A FUNERAL CEREMONY	64
VI.	IN WHICH THE STRANGER LOSES HIS TEMPER	74

BOOK II.

VII.	THE RETURN OF THE WANDERER	85
VIII.	IN WHICH JOE LEARNS SOME OF HIS OWN HISTORY	99
IX.	FLIGHT	115
X.	'MY LADY MISCHIEF'	127
XI.	A NEW HOME	138

TRANSFER FROM U.S. SEP 1916

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XII.	'MY LADY MISCHIEF' AGAIN	156
XIII.	KNOTTOAK	171
XIV.	CLEM HAY	184
XV.	THE STRANGER REVEALS HIS IDENTITY	197
XVI.	HIDDEN TREASURE	208
XVII.	ON THE TRACK	219
XVIII.	JOE'S REVENGE	235
XIX.	A CONFESSION	247
XX.	DON'S WOOING	265
XXI.	AFTERWARDS	275
XXII.	CONCLUSION	285

The Wings of Silence

CHAPTER I.

AN AUSTRALIAN DESERT.

In the shelter afforded by two low parallel sand-rises squatted an aboriginal woman, small, thin, and unutterably repulsive. Absolutely naked—from desire rather than choice, for a rough cloak of wallaby skin lay on the ground by her side—she huddled over the tiny fire of twigs which smouldered at her feet; such an absurdly small specimen of a fire—more like a large handful of burning matches. A space about the size of a soup-plate was covered with a layer of light gray ashes, rising in the centre into a miniature pyramid, which the woman from time to time augmented by the addition of a few twigs and withered leaves. Beneath the pyramid roasted some roots or bulbs, which the watcher occasionally disinterred for inspection. With such a fire the cook-

ing was naturally slow, and Murninnie was hungry; but, on the other hand, it was better to cook slowly by a small fire which made no smoke than to cook quickly by a large fire which would send up big tell-tale wreaths into the air, and perhaps bring upon Murninnie the terrible monster, half beast and half man, which she had seen afar-off only that same day.

There was nothing in Murninnie's attitude expressive of grief. If there could be said to be any expression at all in her face, it inclined somewhat to satisfaction, which, indeed, she could not help feeling when she reflected that Kalkari, her husband, who had beaten and starved her, forced her to work harder than any other lubra in the tribe, and only that morning compelled her to abandon her little child, had probably already been eaten up by the great monster. Regret for Kalkari she had none; he was cruel even when food was plentiful; he was quarrelsome and greedy, and her body still ached with the blows he had given her to compel her to relinquish her child.

But now Kalkari was probably dead; the monster, having eaten, would be surfeited, and by-and-by, when night came, she would travel back to where her little child was hidden. Murninnie was not fanciful or imaginative, therefore she was not troubled by visions of snakes or other reptiles injuring the little one, and excepting snakes there

were no other dangers that she knew of in this lonely desert, except only thirst and hunger, and the child was sturdy and strong. As for the monster, she feared him but little, for Kalkari was a big man, and would surely satisfy for awhile even the wonderful beast-man which had captured him.

And so she sat by the tiny fire, her dull eyes catching an occasional glow from the small transient flames which flickered and sank as each additional twig was added to the gray mound. The sun had not yet declined behind the western horizon, and there was still enough light to reveal in all its loneliness and sterility the features of the surrounding country. As far as the eye could reach stretched long, low, undulating sand-hills running parallel to each other, some of them totally, others partly, covered with dwarfed shrubs, of which many were half-dead from the effects of the long hot summer. In the whole panorama there was not one single tree visible—nothing to catch the eye or serve as a landmark—and over all rested a loneliness that was oppressive, a silence that was unbroken by note of bird or hum of insect—an impalpable presence brooding over a land of inhospitality.

Suddenly Murninnie bent her head and listened, sprang to her feet, and sank quivering to the ground, for there just overhead, on the crest of the nearest western sand-ridge, appeared the form of Kalkari—

Kalkari, whom she had deemed dead! And behind him with great strides came the monster of the morning. The soft sand had deadened the noise of their advance, and so close were they that Murninnie had only just secured the roasted bulbs and snatched up her skin rug ready for flight when Kalkari caught sight of her, and headed in her direction, evidently in the hope that the monster might turn his attention to the lubra, and so allow him, Kalkari, to escape.

But even as he turned in his stride Murninnie saw a strange and wonderful sight. The great beast parted in the middle, and the under part of him stood still while the upper part advanced a few feet; then came a noise, fire and smoke belched forth from the upper part, and, lo! when she looked again the beast was whole, and coming towards her, and Kalkari lay face downwards on the sand.

Quivering in every limb, too paralyzed with horror to attempt to escape, Murninnie watched the great strange beast come ploughing down the slope. Now it was at the spot where Kalkari lay, and again it broke in two, and the upper part became like a man. And now it stooped over Kalkari, and dragged him to his feet, and they came on to where she crouched, horror-stricken, by the smouldering fire . . . and the thing which had been part of a great beast put out a brown hand and

touched her gently, and looking up, she saw that it was indeed a man, wearing strange garments upon his body, and his face and neck were not black like her own and Kalkari's, but bronzed to the colour of the padargo-root, and his eyes were blue and shining, like the berries of the maccarra bush. With furtive looks she scanned the wonderful being as he bound Kalkari's wrists with a curious belt, and made him fast to the beast which stood by—a huge beast, with big eyes and four feet; a beast with long hair upon its neck and glittering things which dangled at its sides. And now the strange man was beckoning to her to follow, and had put one foot into the nearest of the glittering things, and, lo! he was again part of the beast, and was moving away with Kalkari by his side, and she, Murninnie, following awestruck in the rear.

Westward, over one sand-dune and up the next, mile after mile, the strange thing led them on till they came in sight of a long gray column, which Murninnie knew to be a camp-fire; she knew, too, that somewhere near the place from which the smoke uprose must be the spot in which she had deposited her child, and her dull eyes brightened ever so little with the recognition. It was a pity though, she thought, that the strange monster had not killed Kalkari; he was so cruel, so greedy, and there was another man in the tribe who desired her, and for

whom she would willingly toil all through the hottest day grubbing up the roots of the padargo, or hunting for the long slimy worms which burrowed under the stones of the desert; for him she would even go at night to the place where the stars make a hole in the water, so that it eddies round and round, and draws folk down to the inside of the earth. Yes; it was a pity he had not killed Kalkari.

And now they were drawing near to the big smoke, and Murninnie's heart beat fast and furious, and her thin legs trembled under her so that she could hardly walk, for right in front of them were great shapes—beasts with spears on their heads, beasts with four legs, and great eyes which watched her and made her sick with terror; but the man-beast whom she followed led her past them and down into a little sheltered hollow, where there was, Murninnie knew, soft moist sand, beneath which one could get water even in the driest weather. And here, in the place where she and Kalkari had camped only that morning, were many strange things—men with brown faces like her leader, beasts like that of which he seemed part, and a curious thing that did not move, clothed with a flapping cover the colour of a lizard's belly. In the midst of these marvels the leader separated himself from the beast, and leading it, beckoned Murninnie towards the flapping cover,

from under which there presently sounded a shrill squeak, the cry of a little child. . . . The woman of the desert started forward, halted, and looked irresolutely at the strange being. Then there was another little squeal; the stranger showed his white teeth, and lifted a corner of the pendant cover . . . and, lo! Murninnie saw her child on the ground, gambolling with one of these strange new beings, who seemed sometimes half men and half beast, and at others were all men.

With a little cry she snatched up the child, slinging him deftly in the short cloak, and fastening it upon her back. The sprawling figure chuckled as she stood breathless and trembling, and a deep voice spoke words which she could not understand.

'My God!' was what the man said, and then, turning to the man who stood by the awning, he continued: 'So you caught that slippery beggar, after all, Doctor, and the lubra, too?'

'It was a deuced long job, though,' muttered the other. 'The man runs like a kangaroo, and I had to frighten him with my gun at last, or I should never have caught him.' Then turning to another man, he said, 'Here, Smith, you take charge of the beggar, and mind you don't let him slip a second time . . . and Dixon, you go out and take Marnda's place with the cattle, and send him here. Charlie,' he resumed, addressing the man who had been

frolicking with the child, 'have you mended the cart?'

'Yes, Doctor; she's right enough now.'

'How about the water?'

'Smith has been bailing it up with a pannikin pretty well all day. There's enough for to-night, at all events.'

'You wantum Marna?' asked a soft liquid voice from the entrance to the awning.

'Oh, there you are, Marna! Come along, Charlie; bring the woman.'

Murninnie followed them trembling to where the man Smith was sitting by the camp-fire mending a pair of tattered boots. Beneath him, and being in fact his seat, lay Kalkari, whose proximity to the fire had evidently given rise to unpleasant anticipations, for his roving, restless eyes were distended with fear, and the perspiration stood in drops upon his dusky skin.

'Lie still, darn you!' ejaculated Smith angrily, as his captive, hearing the approaching footsteps, wriggled round to view the new danger.

'Gently, Smith, gently. You'll knock all his wind out.'

'Good thing, too,' muttered Smith under his breath, and giving the prostrate figure a furious look. 'He's like a blooming eel, Doctor—wriggle, wriggle, all the time.'

'Well, you can untie his feet for a while, and let him sit up while Marna asks him about the country . . . only see that you keep your hands on him all the while, or we shall lose him again.'

Dropping his half-cobbled boot, and, knife in mouth, swinging himself astride the black fellow, Smith bent forward to untie the rope which bound his feet. At the same time the captive, catching the gleam of the knife, and fully convinced that his last hour was come, set his teeth into that portion of Mr. Smith's anatomy which was most convenient, and bit with such ferocity that the startled man, with a yell of affright, jumped hastily to one side amid the laughter of his companions.

'I think we will leave him as he is,' said the Doctor with a grim smile. 'Here, Marna, you talka longa him. Where water? where grass? how far?'

Marna, a smart-looking native, clad in an old Crimean shirt, riding trousers, and top-boots, sat down beside the captive, and with a preliminary 'I say,' to show off his English, began interrogating him. For a long time it seemed as though the man could not understand, but at length Marna turned to the Doctor with a grin, 'Yes, Dottor, him plenty yabber.'

It was a tedious process, the Doctor dictating the questions to the semi-civilized blackfellow,

who in turn addressed them to his compatriot. The information received was not by any means cheering.

North-west the captive declared the country to be absolutely waterless, to the east occasional waters; to the north and north-east he had not been; to the southward there were 'plenty waters,' as Marna translated it.

'But we want to go nor'-west; stick to that, Marna. Has he been there?'

It appeared he had been two days' journey from the present camp in a north-westerly direction, but there was no water, no grass—nothing but sand and a great devil-monster.

'Oh, bother the devil-monster!' ejaculated the Doctor. 'Has he ever heard of any tribe crossing from here to the nor'-west?'

It appeared that he had not; no blackfellow would go further than he himself had gone, *i.e.*, two days' journey to the place where the red-ochre was. Why? Because of the devil-monster, who lay in wait for all unwary travellers. Why did the devil-monster confine himself to this tract? Because it was all flat—no hills or trees. What difference did that make? The devil-monster could not swoop down on his prey except on flat country, for his wings were so large that they stretched far and wide, and, if he got caught in the trees, the Great Spirit would kill him

and take back the wings which had been stolen from him long, long ago.

Questioned again, he told how the Great Spirit had once been hunting in the northern wilds, and in order to secure his prey, had incautiously taken off his wings and left them leaning against a high hill: how, while the Spirit rested himself by his quarry, the devil-monster had burrowed underground (for he had no wings, and was so doomed to live under, or on the earth), and after a while the devil had burrowed right up to the top of the hill and secured the wings with magic arts and the pointing of the bone, so that the Great Spirit could not regain them. Then the Spirit cursed all that part of the earth and made it silent; he breathed upon it, and the grass and trees and water were shrivelled up; he spat upon it, and the surrounding earth became sandy and salt. Then he turned to the great wings which he had once worn, and put the seal of silence upon them, that they might no more whirr through the summer air or quiver in the white moonlight, but should move silently and without joy wheresoever the devil-monster might direct them.

And then the Spirit, wingless and miserable, had disappeared for ever in the hole which the stars made in the water, and in the northern desert the Wings of Silence still leaned against the Devil's Hill, except when he was using them; and whenever

the Wings of Silence were outspread above man or beast, they were unable to call out or speak. Silence was upon them as upon the earth, and they were dumb.

'I've heard something like it before,' said the Doctor, 'and, after all, it is no more absurd than the mythology of the ancients—is it, Welldridge?' he asked, turning to a short wiry man who had been smoking silently by the fire during the inquiry.

'Oh, hang heathen mythology!' growled the man surlily. 'If what he says is true, don't you see, our expedition will be fruitless. *We* can't travel without water, and *we* haven't got wings.'

'Good gracious, man!' ejaculated the Doctor in a lower voice, 'don't you understand? These "Wings of Silence" are evidently the cliffs to which Caffyn referred: "*Two big red cliffs with a tower-like bluff in the centre, looking at a distance like the wings and neck of a bird.*" Don't you remember?'

Welldridge took his pipe from his mouth and stared.

'Do you think so?' he asked doubtfully.

'It is possible, at all events—more than possible, for we are due south-east of our destination according to Caffyn's story and these Wings of Silence, according to the nigger, about nor'-west. And another thing, you remember what stress he laid

on the curious appearance of the hills? They could not possibly be mistaken, he said, because of their peculiar formation—and, by Jove! I recollect now, he said the place had probably once been an aboriginal burying-place, for he found many human remains during his excavations.'

'The victims of the devil-monster,' said Welldridge drily.

'Oh, of course that story is all moonshine; the blacks are cram-full of legends of that description. Very often the head-men invent some such fable in order to keep the tribe away from any spot which has been used as a burial-ground. They are very superstitious.'

'Well, supposing for argument sake that our goal is identical with the nigger's Wings of Silence, how on earth are we to get there? According to the blackfellow, the intervening country is absolutely waterless.'

'I don't know,' said the Doctor slowly. 'Perhaps the best plan will be to go back to our last camp, where there is still plenty of feed and water, and make it a base from which to make exploring expeditions. We could not take the bullocks on any further in their present condition, in any case; they want a good week's spell to set them up.'

While the two who appeared to be the leaders of the party were conversing, the men, Dixon, Smith

and Charlie, were engaged in watching an animated discussion between Murninnie and the black boy Marna. Kalkari had been liberated some time since by the Doctor's orders, and had fled precipitately from the scene of his late captivity; but Murninnie's charms had apparently captivated Marna, and, heedless of her husband's departure, she squatted by the fire and regaled herself on the half-cooked meat tendered her by her compatriot, who, in the meantime, plied her with a continuous stream of questions.

'That one,' said Marna presently, addressing the Doctor—'that one tellum big one waterhole longa there (pointing north-easterly) plenty dutt (duck). White man been longa there two, tree, ten moons; blackfellow killum when that one (pointing to Murninnie) piccaninny.'

The Doctor's eyes glistened.

'Hear that, Welldridge?' he said to his companion; 'that must be the water where Caffyn's partner was killed. By Jove! we're on the track all right, though I never dreamt we could be near the "waterhole." Caffyn said it was only about four days' journey from the gold hills.'

'I wouldn't put much faith in what the woman says; she can't tell Marna how many miles it is from here, and if she did I don't believe the young fool could interpret it. He calls everything a moon—

days, weeks, months, years; it's all the same to him.'

'What an old wet-blanket you are, man!' said the other impatiently. 'It is decided we go back to our old camping-ground to-morrow, eh?'

'Oh yes; that's evidently the best thing to do.'

The Doctor rose and strolled over to the canvas awning, and after a short interval returned with a violin under his arm.

'I'm going to try the power of music over our lady friend,' he said with a laugh.

Murninnie paused, bone in hand, as a faint long-drawn sigh made itself vaguely heard above Marna's chatter. She could not see the curious instrument, which the Doctor purposely kept out of sight, and a vague uneasiness seized her. Again the note came softly through the air, and with frightened eyes the woman peered into the direction from which it came. The tranquillity of the others, however, reassured her, and she was again about to give her attention to the half-picked bone, when a weird sobbing cry uprose, apparently from the earth itself. With a yell of fright the woman dropped her bone and fled into the darkness, pursued by a perfect medley of discordant sounds, which presently changed into the plaintive melody of a tune that every bushman knows. As the first notes of the air fell upon their ears, the adventurers one and all broke into the

chorus of the song, which, often as they had sung it, never seemed to grow monotonous:

> 'Oh, the salt-bush, and the blue-bush,
> And the deep reed-fringed lagoon,
> The samphire and the camp-fire glowing red!
> Oh, the jingle of the hobbles,
> And the bright light of the moon,
> And the 'possums in the gum-trees overhead!'

The chorus ended, the Doctor sang, in a deep mellow voice, the lines which should have prefaced it:

> 'With a saddle for his pillow, and a blanket for his bed,
> At his feet the camp-fire blazing, bright and clear,
> Lightly sleeps the weary bushman, while the branches overhead
> Whisper songs of bushland welcome in his ear.'

'Chorus! Out with it, boys!' he urged, as he concluded the verse.

And again Murninnie, hiding in the sand-hills far away, heard the voices come chiming across the darkness, and wondered vaguely at the curious corroboree of the white man.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH IS GIVEN THE HISTORY OF DONALD McINTYRE.

When Donald, or, as his friends called him, Don, McIntyre left Edinburgh, with his diploma in his pocket and the memory of an unprecedentedly brilliant college career fresh in his mind, it had seemed to those who knew him that he was one of the most fortunate mortals of modern times. He was absurdly young to have gained such high honours, was tall, strong, and athletic, had plenty of money, was a fair linguist, an excellent singer and musician, devoted to the profession he had embraced, and in which everyone foretold he would make himself famous.

His lack of near relatives was sometimes hinted at as a calamity, since so high-spirited and successful a young man needed home influences to counteract the petting and adulation which naturally fell to

one so dowered mentally and bodily—and pecuniarily.

But Don, though he might sometimes wish that he had a mother and sister like other fellows, was at the same time quite alive to the advantages of being his own master; and when he turned his dark, spirited face for the last time to look at 'old Edinbro',' regret at the parting was already mingled with visions of future triumphs.

He had decided, like most young Scotchmen, to travel, and the next twelve months were spent in Germany, where he visited the hospitals, made the acquaintance of some of the most eminent surgeons and physicians, managed to pick up a great deal of knowledge, useful and otherwise, became proficient in the mysteries of student life, and had generally a very jolly time. But at the end of the twelve months he wrote to a friend in Edinburgh that he was not satisfied with himself. He had been wasting time, he said; his mind was made up to make a specialty of one subject, and to that end he was once more setting off for London to study under a certain famous member of the profession. . . . And the kindly hearts of his friends in the old Scotch city were all gladdened at the decision, for, as they put it, Don was the very man for a specialist.

They heard little of him after this—an occasional rumour that the famous physician had mentioned him

as one of the most brilliant young men he had met, or a short note from Don himself to his friends stating that he was well and busy, and then a long silence, broken at last by the news that he had left London and gone to Paris. Two or three years went by, and the little coterie of friends who still remained in Edinburgh learned with surprise that 'Dr. Don' had volunteered to proceed to South Africa with an expeditionary force against a chief with an unpronounceable name and an unmentionable record.

As time went on and no news came of the clever young doctor, some of his acquaintances made inquiry, resulting in the knowledge that Don had passed through the campaign unscathed, and had gone to Mexico. From this time on there came occasional rumours anent the wanderer. He was in Chili, he had been seen in Norway, he was practising his profession in Canada, and so on, until at last they gave up all hope of ever seeing him again, and with a sigh for his unaccountable conduct in roving about the world like a medical gipsy, when he might have been an ornament to and perhaps the head of his profession, they dismissed him as impracticable.

Now Don, on reaching London and putting himself at the feet of Sir William Falconer, was actuated by other feelings than those which he had confided to his friends; certainly he did not wish to study under Sir William, whose specialty was one in

which, as everyone knew, the young Scotchman had taken an extraordinary interest. But keenly as he was interested in the experiments of the famous physician, there is reason to doubt whether, unless he had some other inducement, his devotion to science would have led him to curtail the travels to which he had looked forward with such eagerness, and which he had mapped out so carefully during his student days.

One of Sir William's greatest friends was a German physician residing in Berlin, and it so happened that the Englishman, accompanied by his youngest daughter, was on a visit to his friend at the period of Don McIntyre's sojourn in the city; and though some time elapsed before the young people became known to each other, the acquaintance once made soon developed on Don's side into a very much warmer feeling.

Very soon after his first meeting with Mary Falconer, the young man began to absent himself from the society of the somewhat wild coterie amongst whom he had lately passed his evenings, and, indeed, a great number of his nights, and no effort of his indignant friends succeeded in drawing him back into their company. He had been so popular with them on account of his daring and ready wit, had always been so ready to produce his violin and play with or to them, or sing rollicking

Scotch student songs—the translation of which into German disconcerted many a bold essayist—that his defection was not to be permitted without protest. But Carl might cajole, and Heinrich might swear and mutter guttural words of dreadful import: Don went on with his sweethearting, and heeded neither the entreaties nor the threats.

It was not until Otto von Borheim himself had failed to lure the wanderer back to the ways of lager-bier, pipes, music, mischief and theatre-going that their efforts were discontinued. Otto had not only composed an oration for delivery to the deserter, but at a mock-solemn meeting of the students had rehearsed, amid general acclamation from his comrades, and with much gratification to himself, the pathetic and stirring appeal with which Don was to be brought back to the fold. It was therefore with a confident air that, accompanied by his brother Max, he waited on young McIntyre, and begged leave on behalf of himself and his comrades to say *einige wörte.* In an equally solemn and high-flown speech Don had replied, dwelling regretfully upon his sorrow at being compelled to withdraw from the *niemals zu vergessenden* of the *flatte Bürschen* with whom he had passed so many happy hours, but who, like himself, being disciples of science, would doubtless agree with him that in the life of every man there came a time when the claims

of science clashed with those of Bacchus and those other gods whose shrines were so pleasant to worship at, and when that time came no man—not even his dear friend Otto himself—would hesitate to say which should prevail. No, there could be no possible doubt whatever, for had not Otto himself sung in felicitous words (of his own composition doubtless), in regard to this same Science, that

> 'She is my mistress—seated high—
> She beckons me on, and on, and on'?

'Yah!' growled the indignant Otto, defeated with his own weapons, 'call her not Science, my susceptible friend; call her Mees Marie Falconer!'

It was a pity that such a pleasant companionship should end in so abrupt a manner. Whether it was the reference to Mary Falconer, or Max's chuckle of amusement which upset Don's equilibrium, was not known, but when, a few minutes later, the fiery young Scot glanced somewhat contritely from the window upon Otto's departing figure, and noted his blood-stained and demoralized appearance, there was both satisfaction and shame in his mind.

'Confound him! bringing *her* into the conversation,' he muttered to himself as he watched Max's solicitous attentions to his brother, and yet it was with a little pang at his heart that he saw them arm in arm cross over the street and disappear in a

chemist's shop. 'Poor old Otto! I wish I hadn't hit him so beastly hard; . . .' and then, feeling that the sacrifice of friendship at the shrine of love demanded compensation, he added more cheerfully, 'I'll go and see Mary.'

If Otto had been a revengeful man, which he was not, he might have reaped some degree of satisfaction from the rumour which soon afterwards reached him that Don's attachment was not reciprocated.

'I tell you, Otto,' said one of his friends, 'that she cares not for him. All the time she is considering plans and making notes of our peasantry; all her thoughts are engrossed in the idea of assisting the poor. Notwithstanding her father's position, she is, in speech at least, a socialist, a single taxer, a nihilist—what you please, so long as the poor people can be assisted.'

'Pah! she is only a girl,' snorted Otto contemptuously.

'That is why it is so delicious—and sometimes a little sad. She is so pretty and so much in earnest, so important and so condescendingly gracious, and yet she knows nothing, absolutely nothing, of the muddy waters she is stirring up with her pretty white fingers.'

Rumour was, for once in a way, correct. As a friend and coadjutor in her schemes for reform, Mary liked him immensely; in any other light she

declined to regard him at all, and in spite of his impulsiveness Don had sufficient tact to see that at present he had no chance of success.

Prior to Sir William's departure McIntyre had an interview with him, and preferred a request that he might be allowed to assist his distinguished friend's experiments in that particular direction which he himself desired to study, and in which Sir William was already reputed to have made exceedingly important discoveries, and this prayer having been granted, Don returned to London, where his progress with the father was in inverse ratio to his success with the daughter.

At last Don's patience was exhausted, and one day, when Mary had consulted him in regard to some new suggestion regarding her pet hobby, he unburdened himself with so much passion that the poor girl was in doubt for a moment whether he was scolding her or making love to her; but his contemptuous reference to her overlooking himself and his devotion for the sake of a lot of people who showed neither gratitude for her efforts nor appreciation of the changes she advocated, fairly brought her to her senses. What she might have passed by in regard to herself became an insult applied to her protégés.

'And why shouldn't I have plans of cottages and stables—yes, and—and pigstyes, too—if I choose?'

she demanded. 'Have not these poor people the same hopes and feelings and desires as we have? Do you think they *like* to have the poultry and the pigs in their cottages?'

It was not that, Don pleaded; he only wanted her to give him some of the affection she lavished so freely on people who really were nothing to her . . . and she was everything to him.

Perhaps had he been satisfied to enlighten her as to his feelings, and waited till she found out—as he knew she must sooner or later do—the unsatisfactoriness of her self-imposed mission, he might have ultimately been successful. But he could hardly have chosen a worse time for his proposal than now, when the newness and importance of her work pleased and flattered her; and her father's liberality enabled her to gratify her generous instincts, and at the same time procure her a pre-eminence among her fellow-workers which to so young and inexperienced a girl was as delicious as it was novel.

He had looked so miserable, so young, and withal so handsome, that Mary's heart did soften to him momentarily after he had gone from her, and perhaps the feeling that stirred in her then might have developed into something warmer had it been fanned by his continuous proximity.

But she never saw him again, never knew quite how it was that he dropped out of her life so

suddenly. Indeed, she was not the only one who wondered in the days which came afterwards why the departure, even if necessary, need have been so speedy. Good-natured Sir William himself was aggrieved at the unceremonious manner in which his clever young friend had severed their acquaintance.

It was well known among Don's earlier companions that, in spite of his generosity, kind-heartedness and general bonhomie, there lurked under his pleasant exterior a temper which, when roused, was liable at times to become uncontrollable, and it was still remembered by the few who were present at the time how, provoked at some satirical remark made by one of his fellow-students, he had suddenly snatched up a lately amputated leg from the operating-table, and with a well-directed blow not only silenced, but very nearly killed, the satirist.

Fortunately for the aggressor, the few who were present were well disposed to him, and the unfortunate young man who had been attacked having been placated, the matter was not made public till long after Don had left Edinburgh.

Upon leaving Mary Falconer's presence, and with her refusal still ringing in his ears, the young man unfortunately fell in with two clever but exceedingly wild young fellows of his acquaintance who were avowedly bent on mischief. To their half-jocular

invitation to accompany them, Don, to their surprise, instantly acquiesced, and, once started, they found their companion's audacity and recklessness far outrivalling their own. Late in the night, however, when they had retired for a final pipe in the quarters of the youngest of the three, a change came over McIntyre: the fictitious gaiety deserted him, his previous folly revealed itself with startling force, and he became moody and monosyllabic. In vain the others endeavoured to rouse him from his reverie. From curtness he changed to anger, and at last, roused to a sudden fury at a somewhat rough practical joke, he sprang from the floor, and seizing the nearest missile, a bottle, hurled it full in the face of his tormentor.

The next day he had left England, but prior to his departure he paid a visit to a patient in one of the wards of a private nursing institution, and perhaps the quiet-faced nurse who listened to the ravings of her terribly battered and bruised patient had her own opinion of the tall, haggard young fellow who hung so eagerly over the couch of the afflicted man. Perhaps the misery in his eyes struck her as being even more pitiful than the sightlessness of those other orbs into which he peered so earnestly and hopelessly. But whatever she knew or guessed, she never spoke of it, and when some months afterwards a young fellow, sometime one of the wildest

of the wild, but now that most helpless of all God's creatures, a blind man, was helped from the institution into the waiting carriage, Sister Faith turned from the window and murmured: 'I wonder what has become of that other one.'

Long before that time, however—the time when, maddened with disappointment, inflamed with drink, and irritated beyond endurance by the practical joke played upon him, Don had in one hasty act blighted his own and another's career—long before this he had left England with the firm intention of never seeing it again.

The memory of the sightless eyes of his comrade haunted him day and night. In the African wilds, long after his companions had forgotten their troubles and fatigue in sleep, the young doctor would lie sleepless and remorseful. In the wild nights at sea, when the wind and waves tossed the ship like a shuttlecock on the broad ocean, the officer on duty would notice the tall dark passenger leaning over the taffrail and looking with tired eyes at the strife of the elements.

It would be untrue to say he *never* forgot. In the stress of conflict, in the excitement and interest which were inseparable from a life on the frontier, and in those times of ship life when danger threatened, the memories of the past were blotted out by the necessities of the present; but when the

occasion for action passed by, the memories came back to haunt him in his waking moments, to torture him in his dreams. As time went on, and months lengthened into years, the remorse grew less keen, the future less dreary; but long ere he had learned to know again what it meant to sleep dreamlessly, to wake refreshed, he had become a confirmed wanderer, and was never satisfied to stay long in one place. Those who met him in one of the many countries which he visited, and who had known something of his early life, often wondered at the craving for excitement, the continued quest of adventure, and, perhaps more than all, at the apparent poverty of the erstwhile wealthy young doctor. But though they might question him on his love of adventure, there were few who ever dared to refer to his pecuniary change of fortune, and even these—the more daring but less tactful—never obtained a clue to the mystery. And so the years went by. As the self-exile grew longer, the chance of advancement in his profession grew less, and the unspoken but defined intention of returning to England and winning a place for himself, which at one time sprang up in his heart, at last vanished altogether.

After eight years' wandering in many lands, he found himself at last in Western Australia, whither he had been drawn by the report of rich discoveries

of gold. That he had landed with only a few pounds in his pocket troubled him very little, for in his wandering life he had already seen many ups and downs, and perhaps he was really happier in the days when his finances ran low and he was forced to struggle for his daily bread than in those days when fortune smiled upon him and procured him a fairly good appointment, for in the latter case the leisure afforded him by his position paved the way for thoughts and memories which the harder life precluded his yielding to.

He had intended visiting Australia when opportunity offered, but it was really an accident that he came when he did. The surgeon of one of the German steamers coaling at the Cape was so seriously ill that he had to be removed to the hospital, much to the captain's dismay, as he had several cases of sickness on board. McIntyre, who had just reached the Cape from Delagoa Bay, and came on shore at the very moment the sick man was landed, promptly offered to take his place, and as his credentials were good, and, moreover, he spoke German fluently, the bargain was struck at once.

Always strong, muscular, and handsome, McIntyre had by this time developed into a magnificent specimen of a man. His roving life had lent a darker tint to his face, and given him a free, careless carriage; his black beard made him seem older than

he was, and both the nature of his profession and his mode of life for the past few years had unmistakably stamped him as one accustomed to be obeyed.

He made his way to the little settlement known as Coolgardie, and there his services were very soon in request. At first the novelty of the country attracted him, but, as in other cases, that feeling soon gave place to ennui, and as the settlement grew larger and other medical men arrived to alleviate the sufferings of those who had fallen by the way, he started off on a prospecting tour with a party of men led by a small capitalist named Welldridge, whose acquaintance he had made in Perth and afterwards renewed in Coolgardie.

While nearly everyone else seemed to be making rich finds, and every day saw new claims pegged out, Welldridge's party appeared doomed to misfortune. Welldridge himself was a practical miner, and thoroughly understood his business; but, unfortunately, in the early part of their journey, when passing fair 'shows,' he had after prospecting them pronounced them not as good as he hoped to get further on. He was possessed of the idea that, fair as the prospects seemed at Coolgardie and elsewhere, he would further inland discover others of infinitely greater value, and so, like many others, he dropped the substance for the shadow, and months later

returned empty-handed to Coolgardie with his wearied men and camels; and perhaps the knowledge that some of those reefs which he had disdained as 'hardly good enough' had been pegged out and found to yield fair returns did not tend to make his failure more palatable.

'I'll stop here and work off a swindle or two,' he said savagely to McIntyre on the evening of their return to Coolgardie. 'It is easier than prospecting, and pays better.'

McIntyre laughed. A few months in the Bush gives one a very good insight into the characters of one's companions, and he knew perfectly well that Phil Welldridge was speaking at random and out of the bitterness of his disappointment.

'You can laugh,' said Welldridge sourly, 'but you didn't have to pay the piper. I've lost a regular pot over that confounded journey. I'll take a look round at this new place, Kalgoorlie, and then I'm off to the Murchison.'

On a Sunday night, two days later, Don McIntyre, strolling aimlessly on the outskirts of the incipient town, and already slipping back unconsciously into thoughts of the past, was startled by an imprecation which ended in a groan of agony. There was very little light, just sufficient to enable him to descry a small tent, which might once have been white, but which was now stained by sand and dirt to a dingy

brown. Evidently the groan came from the tent, and the Doctor in a few strides stood in the tiny shelter, and by aid of a wax vesta discerned the person whose outcry had arrested him.

It was a common enough incident, and the same thing had happened several times to McIntyre since his arrival in the colony, and as he leaned over the stricken man the little tragedy already sketched itself in his mind. A long prospecting tour, bad water, scanty rations, dust, heat, flies, and disappointment, a week of debauchery in unsanitary Coolgardie to drown the memory of his troubles and peril, and then the first symptoms of that dreaded disease, typhoid.

The man was only in the first stages, but McIntyre had no doubt of the nature of the disease.

'You've got a touch of fever,' he said, bending over the man. 'I am a doctor, and I'll see to you. It is no use sending you to the hospital; the beds are all full, and you'll have a better chance here. Lie still, now, till I come back; I shall not be long.'

The poor wretch gave an assenting murmur, and fell back on the rough bed, and McIntyre, with all his gloomy reminiscences banished, strode hastily to his lodgings, where he found Welldridge awaiting him.

'Kalgoorlie's a good show,' he said directly

McIntyre came within hail of him. 'I am in two minds to put in a month or two there. Will you come on the same terms as before, McIntyre?'

In a few words the Doctor ordered him to keep away for fear of infection, and told him of his present errand.

'Infection be blowed!' cried Welldridge. 'As for the man, you come with me, and let some other doctor look after him. Send round to Rogerson.'

Don was firm. He would nurse this lonely man through his fight with the fever, and then follow Welldridge if he liked, but he would not go back on his word.

'Oh, well, I suppose a few days will see the end of it,' said Welldridge. 'Typhoid up here is generally fatal, and if you're set on it I'll wait for you, though I am hanged if I can see why Rogerson would not do just as well.'

'I'll tell you what you might do,' said Don, turning round from his medicine chest. 'You might lend me that big tarpaulin of yours; it would make a splendid shelter for the poor beggar. His present tent isn't big enough to swing a cat in.'

'You can have it. I'll send it round now by one of the Afghans, and you can put your stores on the camel too, and save carrying them.'

A week later George Caffyn, for that was the wandering prospector's name, was dead; but before

the end came he had confided to Don the secret of a great discovery, and as he had no means of proceeding to the locality, and was, moreover, glad to do Welldridge a good turn, the Doctor took him into his confidence.

'It's a rum story,' said Welldridge reflectively, 'and he had no plans or maps to guide us; besides, he told someone else of his find, didn't he?'

'Yes; it appears so. A young Englishman named Pontifex, but from all I can learn Pontifex pooh-poohed the story.'

'Still, Caffyn told him the secret just as he told you, only for a different reason. . . . In your case, it was in gratitude for your attention and kindnesses; in the other, it was a drunken man's maudlin desire to repay the price of a few free drinks.'

'Well, suppose we take Pontifex in and let him share?'

'We can suggest it, but we had better see what sort of a man he is first. I'm a bit particular who I take with me on a trip like that, and I suppose I am to have a say in it.'

'Of course. If you undertake to finance it, we go shares.'

It did not take them long to ascertain that the young man, Pontifex, had left the town a few days previously, and from what they learned of his in-

temperance it appeared to both the Doctor and Welldridge that his departure without leaving any address was not altogether to be deplored.

'Pontifex? Yes; I know him,' said the landlord of the Diggers' Arms. 'Handy with his fists he is, and nasty-tempered, too, when he's in liquor. Educated? Yes; I should say so. Father a clergyman in the old country, I hear, but Master Joe couldn't hit it with him. Don't wonder at it, though, for there ain't much of the parson about *him*.'

Within a week the Doctor, Welldridge, two white men (Smith and Dixon), with two Afghan camel-drivers and fourteen camels, started from Coolgardie in a bee line towards Lake Amadeus, and for a time all went well. After awhile, however, the water-holes failed, and they bore further and further east, until they were well over the South Australian border, and hundreds of miles out of their track. The passage northward and north-westward still being impracticable, they were obliged to travel still further eastward, until at length, totally out of their course, and with provisions almost exhausted, they came to a small clay-pan, and their misfortunes seemed to reach their climax when they found too late that the water was poisoned and their camels already succumbing to its effects. One by one the poor beasts staggered from the water, and after

more or less protracted agony stretched their ungainly bodies on the burning sand.

Welldridge was almost inconsolable; apart from their value, he was really attached to the animals, most of which were exceptionally good and well trained; and even if the party reached a station, there was little chance of obtaining any camels to enable them to continue their journey.

Two days later, having abandoned the greater part of their possessions and tramped nearly sixty miles, they struck an out-station, and were kindly cared for by the manager and his men; but as for buying camels, it was out of the question, for there were none nearer than Hergott, and even there they were getting scarcer owing to the demand from the Western colony. They made their way to a more easterly and large station, and here, accidentally coming across 'Tracks of McKinlay Across Australia,' McIntyre mooted the possibility of continuing their journey as that intrepid explorer had done with a cart, oxen, horses, and sheep.

Of course Welldridge objected; even the men on the station agreed that to travel with bullocks was fraught with danger, and would in any case prove a tedious and wearisome experience, but the Doctor hammered away at this project, read extracts, argued, read more extracts, and finally succeeded.

The two Afghans were paid and dismissed, a

cart, oxen, sheep, horses, and provisions purchased at the station, and a new hand, appropriately named 'Charlie Driver,' engaged as bullock-driver, or as the station-manager designated it, 'bullock-thumper.'

And that is how Murninnie of the Australian wilds came to be listening to the white men's corroboree in the desert of Ingelappa.

CHAPTER III.

THE DESERT BEYOND INGELAPPA.

PLODDING over a lonely desert lying far north-west of Ingelappa, a small party of adventurers progressed slowly and painfully. One of them, a man apparently the leader, was mounted on an emaciated horse, another drove the bullocks attached to the two-wheeled dray, and the remaining three trudged along in the rear, driving before them half a dozen packhorses.

They were far away from civilization—so far away that the most daring bushman had never penetrated the weary, inhospitable region over which they were travelling. For miles and miles in every direction stretched the everlasting spinifex plains; the sun scorched their bodies and dazzled their eyes, the earth seemed to emit a fiercer heat than even the sun itself, and the feet of the pedestrians seemed almost to burn.

Overhead the copper-coloured sky arched like the roof of hell, and north and south, east and west, wherever their tired bloodshot eyes were turned, the same monotonous dreary view met their gaze. No birds skimmed through the air, no animals moved amid the spinifex. Except themselves, there seemed to be no living thing upon earth, and no noise but that made by the creaking dray broke the uncanny quiet.

Presently even that sound was lost in the sharp reports of the driver's whip as he plied it roughly upon the toiling beasts, but this sound, too, died away. The driver mopped his streaming face, the bullocks with one accord stood still, and the horseman and the men on foot came languidly back to the dray.

'Push them on, Charlie,' the horseman said huskily.

The driver shrugged his shoulders, and moistened his cracked lips with his tongue before he spoke.

'Old Snowy's about done,' he said, pointing to one of the 'polers' with his long whip.

'We must get on, we can't stop here,' the horseman replied as he dismounted and walked up to the bullock and scanned him anxiously. 'Give them a few minutes' breathing time, and push them on again.'

The horse stood with drooping head and half-

closed eyes, just as his rider had left him, and the men threw themselves under the tip of the dray to escape for a little while from the fierce rays of the sun.

Half an hour passed without a word being spoken, and then, obeying a gesture from the man who had been riding, they crawled out again and stood by to see the start.

The driver shouted huskily, sent his long whip heavily upon the oxen, and almost simultaneously drove the butt heavily against the ribs of Snowy—a large-boned, gaunt, white bullock. There was a momentary creaking, the leading bullocks strained gallantly upon their yokes, the onlookers raised their voices in a chorus of hoarse cries, and with their rifles prodded the unfortunate beasts; but Snowy, though he received a double share of punishment and bravely endeavoured to do his part, was spent, and the other oxen desisted almost simultaneously.

One of the men, enraged at their failure, moved up to the white bullock and with a savage oath struck him heavily on the side of the head with his rifle. The patient beast turned its great horned head wearily towards him and made a pitiful low moaning cry; another and a heavier blow fell upon him, and the driver came forward only just in time to stop a third.

'What's the use of that?' he said gruffly, thrusting the man away. 'Leave him alone.'

The man scowled and moved away.

'Look here, Charlie,' cried one of the others, 'we must get on; have another try.'

Again the heavy whip whirled through the air, the hoarse shouts recommenced, and with a frantic pull the weary team got the dray in motion, and struggled on for a few hundred yards; then, with frothing mouth and bloodshot eyes, Snowy fell in his tracks, and lay moaning on the sand, with the yoke bearing heavily against his horns.

'We shall have to unyoke him, Doctor,' the driver said; 'it's the only thing we can do.'

The irons were so hot that the men could scarcely touch them, but at last the white bullock and his mate were freed, and the other three men holding up the pole, the driver hitched on the six forward bullocks, and drew the dray round so as to clear the prostrate beast; then putting two of the others in the pole, they moved on their way again, the white bullock lying where it fell, and its companion standing motionless beside it.

'Poor old Snowy!' the driver muttered, taking a backward glance at the deserted animal; 'he was a grand old bullock.'

None of the others seemed to have any sympathy to spare for the broken-down beast lying in the

scorching sun motionless, save when at intervals its great flanks heaved, and its head scraped slowly against the burning sand as the flies and ants settled down upon its frothing mouth and dim, fast-glazing eyes.

Only his yoke-mate stood by watching the receding dray, and slowly swishing at the flies with his broken stump of a tail.

Again and again the team stopped on their toilsome way, again and again the long whip circled in the air, and descended in knife-like strokes upon their quivering bodies, till they strained once more to the work, until at last when they had left their deserted comrades about half a mile behind they seemed by common consent to give up hope, and stood panting, sullen, and effortless under the rain of blows which descended upon them.

'It's no good, Doctor,' cried the driver as he wiped his streaming face with his shirt-sleeve, 'the poor devils are done; we *must* camp, or lug the dray ourselves.'

The Doctor gloomily acquiesced, and in a few minutes the bullocks were liberated, three of the men taking refuge from the sun beneath the dray, while the Doctor and Charlie walked back, leading two pack-horses carrying sacks, to the place where they had left the bullocks.

They stood and watched the prostrate animal for a minute or two.

'Do you think we can get him to the camp, Charlie? I don't.'

'No; he'll die before night, poor devil.'

'All right; stand clear!'

The driver stepped back, and the Doctor, raising his rifle, put the bullock out of his misery; almost immediately they began skinning and cutting up the carcass, the Doctor leading back the horses with the first small load, for the animals were too weak to carry much, while the driver went on cutting up.

'I reckon you're pretty tired of tramping, Doctor?' he said, when the last of the meat was packed, and they were driving the odd bullock with the laden horse before them; 'it's a good half mile on a bee-line.'

'I've been riding most of the day,' the other replied, 'but I shall be glad to spell a bit; you get the worst of it, tramping and driving the bullocks all day.'

'Oh, I'm used to that,' the driver said carelessly; 'but, by Jove! I *should* like a drink.'

The Doctor nodded, and they plodded back to the dray, to find the other three busily engaged in cutting the meat into strips for drying in the sun. With five of them at work this was soon finished, and they all crawled under the dray again.

'How far away do you reckon the —— place is now, Doctor?' asked the driver after a spell of silence.

'About four miles, according to my reckoning,' the other answered, after scanning a soiled piece of paper on which a rough chart was drawn.

'Curse it all!' cried one of the others—Dixon; 'you said "four miles" this morning and "four miles" last night.'

'Well, I'll say "four miles" again,' the Doctor growled irritably; 'there are no mile-posts in this part of the world.'

The fourth man, Smith, who had struck the bullock, got up, and climbed slowly upon the dray and stood, shading his eyes with his hands, scanning the surrounding country.

'See anything?' asked Charlie, when he presently clambered down and crawled under the dray.

'Yes, h—l!' the other shouted sullenly.

'You will before long, any way, mate,' retorted the driver.

Falling into a paroxysm of rage, Smith, in a hoarse, cracked voice, called down maledictions upon his companions for inducing him to go, and himself for going, upon the journey which was like to end so disastrously.

'Cursing won't help you, man,' said the Doctor. 'Have a chew of a bullet, and give your tongue a rest.'

'D—— your bullets, and your "four miles," and your gold!' croaked the man wildly.

'Say, Doctor, do you think he is going to peg out?' whispered the driver, as Smith turned his face from them and lay muttering to himself.

'Not he; got too much talk in him to be anywhere near pegging out,' interjected Welldridge, speaking for the first time.

They lay there for several hours, dozing miserably now and then, only to awaken with a feeling of suffocation in their throats and an ever-increasing craving for water. When the sun began to set they yoked up the bullocks again, and pursued their west by north course, until the oxen again broke down and were again turned adrift; then dragging their blankets from beneath the tarpaulin, they lay down by the side of the waggon to pass the night as best they could.

The moon rose and flooded the lonely desert with her silvery beams, the spinifex plains changed into a great silvery sea, and one by one the tired men fell asleep.

The men had started on their quest well fitted out, but the Doctor's directions had not been quite exact, and week by week they struggled desperately on, skirting the great desert, and making every now and then excursions on horseback in search of some clue, but they had now but seven horses and seven

bullocks left, and though the Doctor and Welldridge were sanguine that their goal was nearly reached, the others had almost abandoned hope. Even Charlie, the good-natured, cheerful driver, had given up all idea of seeing the settled districts again; unlike Smith and Dixon, he made no complaints, but stuck sturdily to his work.

The morning after Snowy's death dawned with the promise of another intensely hot day, and Charlie, awaking first, crept from beneath the dray to hunt up his cattle: his tongue was dry and parched, his eyes heavy and sore, and even in the faint light of the morning they ached as he peered about to avoid upsetting the lines of biltong, which radiated from the waggon to the yoke-keys driven into the sand.

Seeing nothing of the animals from where he stood, he mounted the dray and scanned the surrounding plains. Suddenly he blinked his eyes, stared incredulously westward, and shouted:

'*Doctor! Doctor!*'

Not only Don McIntyre, but the other men responded almost instantly to the hoarse cry, and, rifles in hand and the fear of blacks in their minds, came hurriedly from beneath the dray, sending more than one long streamer of biltong into the sand as they climbed to their companion's side.

There was no need to speak; apparently only a

few miles to westward loomed a short range of peculiar-looking hills.

The Doctor tried to speak, but only emitted a hoarse croak.

'Bullocks?' cried Charlie, interpreting his meaning; 'gone off to the water yonder, you bet your life, and the horses too!'

The thought of water electrified them all into instant action; hastily throwing back the tarpaulin, they snatched a handful of biscuits apiece, and thrusting them, with a few strips of the meat, into their canvas bags, each man shouldered his rifle, and started off for the range. The distance was greater than it seemed at the first glance, and they were so weak that they had to take frequent rests, and the sun was high in the heavens when they reached the base of the short range which, beginning in a low ridge of red, slab-like rocks at either end, centred in a big, tower-like bluff, flanked on either side by perpendicular and peculiarly shaped cliffs of the same colour, having at a distance the appearance of two immense wings.

Climbing the northern ridge of rocks, the party, keeping close together, surmounted a succession of hills, each rising higher than its northern neighbour, until at last they reached the summit of the central range, which was also the apex of the more northerly cliff or wing. At their feet lay a steep wooded

valley covered with grass, yellow and withered in the more exposed portions, but still cool and green at the bottom. Midway down the hill on which they stood trickled a tiny little stream shining in the sunlight like a silver thread as it wound through the gully below, and was hidden from sight by the intervening trees and bushes.

The men dashed wildly down the slope towards the stream, too eager to taste its waters to waste time in picking their steps.

On they hurried, regardless of the bushes which tore their clothes, or the rocks which grazed their limbs, and in a few minutes they had reached their haven and thrown themselves down by the clear water.

Only Charlie uttered a word of warning as the others reached it.

'Not too much, mates! take it steady, or it will kill you.'

Don McIntyre, who was nearest him, lifted his dripping face from the cool water and nodded; the others lay drinking in huge draughts as if their thirst would never be slaked. Charlie, having taken a moderate drink, seized Dixon and forcibly drew him away.

'You'll kill yourself, you fool! Here, Doctor, lend a hand, or he'll do himself some hurt.'

Don took Dixon unceremoniously by the collar

and held him firmly down, while Charlie ran to Smith, who was still drinking.

'You infernal fool!' the driver ejaculated, jerking him away roughly; 'do you want to kick the bucket now we *are* here?'

Smith tore himself away and again buried his face in the water, holding on to a small root which projected from the ground, while Charlie tugged in vain to move him.

'Stay there and be hanged!' the bullock-driver said at last, finding he could not move him, and rejoining the others, who were laving their faces and hands in the precious fluid.

'Do you see that?' said Welldridge suddenly, pointing down the gully to a great heap of stones and earth, which seemed to have been hurled from the hillside.

'Other chaps!' cried McIntyre savagely. 'By Gad! if we're too late, after all!'

He took his rifle in his hand, and, followed by Welldridge and Charlie, moved towards the object which had attracted their attention. As they drew nearer they became more cautious, and kept to the most sheltered parts of the gully. Reaching at last the mound of earth and stones, they stood looking at the shaft which had been excavated near it, and over which a ropeless windlass still stood. On every side the earth had been turned up; a rough sluicing-

box lay on the ground, a broken pick lay near the shaft's mouth, but there was no sign of man about the place.

Welldridge pointed to a well-worn path, leading upwards, and following it, they came to a little bare circle with a mud rim about six inches high. Inside the circle were two rough bedsteads made of bags, through which long poles had been thrust, supported by forked branches embedded in the ground.

'Had their tent here; they're gone,' said Welldridge, looking at his companions, who nodded thoughtfully.

'Haven't been gone very long, I guess,' he said suddenly. 'Look here!' He pointed to a trail of ants, and, stooping down, picked up a tin which had held preserved meat; inside were a few still moist morsels.

'Those beggars would have cleaned it out in twenty-four hours, and most likely eaten the tin too,' he said, pointing to the ants. 'The other fellows are not far off, but they've cleared out, that's certain, and we can have their leavings, if there are any.'

He kicked the tin into the gully viciously as he spoke, and retraced his steps to the shaft.

'I'll go down,' he said, after peering into it for a minute; 'you two stop here and keep a look out.'

He climbed cautiously downwards, and was soon

lost to view, but reappeared presently, covered with dust and dirt.

'It's no depth; they've made a horizontal tunnel into the hill. I had only a few matches, but by their light I could see that there is plenty of stuff there . . . we are in it yet.'

Charlie's face brightened, and he began to cut up some tobacco.

'I reckon the other fellows must have made a rare pile. I wonder who they were, and how they came to find the place.'

'Don't know who they were. I expect that fellow Pontifex thought better of it, after all,' said Welldridge; 'but we had better hunt up the bullocks and horses, and get the waggon up. We can camp on their old ground; it is the handiest place.'

'Rightum!' said Charlie, puffing away contentedly.

'Coo-ee, if you see the brutes, and you take this gully; the Doctor can take the next one. I'll go over the range and see if there is another creek.'

'Rightum!' repeated Charlie.

The Doctor and Welldridge proceeded on their mission, and Charlie, loath to leave his comfortable resting-place on the hillside, sat placidly smoking for a minute or so.

'Rum old cove, the Doctor,' he said aloud, meditatively; 'been a bit of a big bug in his time, I reckon.'

He knew very little of the Doctor's earlier history, but had learned in a fragmentary manner of his travels and adventures in other lands; and these had for Charlie, who had never been out of South Australia in his life, a fascination which he could not resist. While quite aware of the difference in their positions, and giving the Doctor no cause to complain of undue familiarity, the rough bullock-driver had formed a liking for McIntyre which the other reciprocated. For it was impossible to see much of the good-hearted, cheerful, and willing fellow without admiring him. His manliness and indomitable pluck were two great factors in attracting both Welldridge and McIntyre to him, while he, on the other hand, got on excellently with Welldridge, and was in a fair way to make a hero of the Doctor, whose occasional recklessness and brusqueries contrasted so strangely with those other moods of which he sometimes gave them experiences. Notwithstanding that two-thirds of them were utterly incomprehensible to him, there was nothing which Charlie liked better than listening to the Doctor's songs; and it was a never-failing source of amusement to Welldridge, sitting, pipe in mouth, by the camp-fire, to watch the absorbed, serious, and mystified face of the 'bullock-thumper,' when Don McIntyre, struck by some sudden memory, would start off for Charlie's benefit a German song in

English words, and, forgetting their sequence, finish off in the original.

As he watched his hero disappear in the bushes, Charlie wondered vaguely how it must feel to be such an one as Don McIntyre—to have all those gifts, that magnificent physique, and those memories of happy travels in many lands; and he wondered, too, as he rose slowly to his feet and set off on his quest, why sometimes in the night-watches the Doctor was so restless and sleepless, and what he meant by those words which he had muttered so fiercely in his dreams, 'Stop it, I tell you; stop it!'

CHAPTER IV.

THE OASIS.

In the lowest dip of the gully, where the waters of the creek had widened out into a broad, reed-fringed waterhole, Charlie found the horses and bullocks feeding on the still green grass, which grew thick and sweet in this sheltered and beautiful spot.

Tired and hungry, he sat down and made a rough meal of meat and biscuit, with an occasional drink from the water-hole. The gully was strewn with great boulders, in the crevices of which grew delicate maiden-hair ferns and 'quaking-grass'; here and there a 'blackboy,' or grass-tree, spread its long leaves. Overhead the trees met and interlaced their branches, and from the water-hole came the croakings of the bull-frogs.

Reclining on the soft grass, with his head supported by a lichen-covered boulder, Charlie lazily ate his food, while his eyes wandered with delight about

the curious place, so different from the inhospitable country which environed it.

Across the water-hole the dragon-flies skimmed backwards and forwards, their gauzy wings glistening in the sunlight; little tadpoles came wriggling through the water. One of the bullocks—Snowy's mate—stood knee-deep amongst the rushes, the black mud in which his hoofs were planted discolouring the water as he bowed his great horned head to plunge his muzzle in the cool liquid.

'Why, it's the very place the Doctor sings about,' muttered Charlie to himself, as he began cutting more tobacco for the inevitable pipe—

'"The deep reed-fringed lagoon."'

Even Snowy's mate was startled at the unusual sound, and turned his big head suspiciously towards the singer. Charlie had an idea that he could not sing, and seldom ventured to do so in public; but now, as he drove the animals back towards the rendezvous, he shouted the well-known chorus with great pleasure to himself and much alarm to his charges; and so vigorous were his efforts that both McIntyre and Welldridge soon joined him, and congratulated him on his double success—finding the horses and cattle and his voice.

They had spent so much time in exploring the shaft, and in searching for the stock, that when they

again reached the bottom of the main valley, and were directly under the slope in which the shaft was sunk, it was nearly three o'clock. The Doctor had caught one of the packhorses, and with a leather strap round its under jaw, in lieu of a rein, proposed riding it back to the waggons and driving the bullocks; but Charlie's charges manifested a distinct aversion to leaving the valley and climbing the steep hill-slopes. No sooner did they get them to ascend a few yards, than first one and then another of the beasts turned back in the direction of the grassy valley, and at last Welldridge left them, in order to summon Smith and Dixon to give their assistance.

Left to themselves, the Doctor and Charlie cut down a long sapling apiece, and armed with these, in lieu of the short sticks they had previously used, again renewed their efforts. The oxen, either tired of rebellion or brought to obedience by the sight of the long whip-sticks, quietly allowed themselves to be driven in the required direction; and they were well on the crest of the Southern Hill, when a loud shout from below attracted the attention of those in charge.

'I'll go back and see what he wants,' said the Doctor, after watching Welldridge's gesticulations for a moment. 'I expect Smith is ill; he drank a terrible lot of water.'

Charlie assented, and while the Doctor returned to the gully, the bullock-driver and his charges plodded slowly southward over first one range and then another, until at last the desert lay before him.

By the time he had rounded the southern ridge or spur, and was heading north-north-east across the plain, and close in by the Wings of Silence, the sun was setting; and Charlie noticed, with something akin to superstition, how, as the light faded, and the shadows grew darker beneath the cliff, their resemblance to two huge pinions became more and more apparent, and, as the shadow at the base of the cliff grew darker, the further desert seemed to brighten by contrast. In that fading light it was easy to understand the aboriginal superstition; for even to the bullock-driver it seemed as though, right in the bosom of the great sand plain, two dusky wings, tipped just now with the golden glory of the setting sun, upreared themselves, to hide behind their mystic forms the strange oasis of the Australian desert.

As Charlie passed out of the shadow and emerged upon the lighter ground, the Doctor rejoined him.

'What did they want?' inquired the bullock-driver.

'Smith drank too much water; he must have been dead some time before they found him.'

'Dead?'

'Yes.'

They walked on quietly enough after this. The dead man had not been a favourite with either of them; but, in any case, so sudden a calamity was shocking, and with but few human beings in the party, and separated from civilization by hundreds of miles of unknown and practically impassable country, the death of one of their number, however unpopular he might be, could not but cast a gloom over their spirits.

The two men found the dray perfectly safe; no living thing, animal or human, had approached it; and after securing the oxen to the chains, and tethering the Doctor's packhorses to the dray-wheels, they sat and smoked quietly until the moon rose. Then, yoking up the patient beasts, they slowly made their way back towards their haven.

In the moonlight the weird appearance of the Wings was intensified; all around for miles and miles, save just in front of the voyagers, lay the shimmering sandy plain. Immediately in front up rose the great Wings—sombre and mysterious, their tops irradiated by the moonbeams and their bases veiled in deep shadows.

'It's a queer place,' quoth Charlie, as he halted his tired team to give them a rest. 'Do you mind what the nigger fellow called it, Doctor?'

'The Wings of Silence? Yes. And a good name, too; they could not have hit on a much more appropriate one. I'll ride in under those shadows, and see if I can make any discoveries. I don't suppose we shall be down this way again for some time, and the formation is curious.'

Charlie nodded and whipped up his oxen; they were very weak still, in spite of their rest, and the packhorses were in equally bad case.

He had not proceeded very far before the yielding sand made it necessary to halt again. At the moment of stopping, there came a loud shout from the direction in which the Doctor had gone, and immediately afterwards he emerged from the shadows of the cliffs into the moonlight, and his comrade could see that he half dragged, half carried an inanimate form.

'My God!' ejaculated Charlie; and then, some vague impulse stirring within him, he lifted his hat from his head and threw it on the ground. 'Poor chap! He's a deader for certain,' he sighed, as he climbed into the dray and flung back the tarpaulin. 'The Doctor will want his medicine case though, I suppose.'

He had swung the box to the back of the dray ready for use, and was about to hurry forward to assist the Doctor, when a sudden thought struck him, and he ran back and picked up his hat.

'My Gow!' he said; 'perhaps it's only a dam nigger.'

But he was soon reassured on that point; the man was undoubtedly white; and, satisfied on that point, Charlie was content to ask no questions till they had brought him the little distance that remained to be traversed between the cliffs and the dray. The medicine-chest was open; the Doctor had unrolled a shabby old leather instrument-case, and, oblivious of his surroundings, was stripping the shirt from the upper part of the man's body, while his companion, wide-eyed and helpless, watched the curious scene.

Suddenly McIntyre uttered an exclamation, and stood up.

'Dead?' asked Charlie.

'No. Catalepsy.'

'Oh!' said Charlie dubiously; 'that's what it is?'

As a matter of fact, he was no wiser than he had been before; but he had no time just then to make further inquiries, for McIntyre rolled up his instruments, shut down the lid of his medicine-chest, and called to him to assist in lifting the man on to the dray.

They made a resting-place for him with their blankets on top of the tarpaulin, securing him from falling out by bolstering up the sides with their

companions' swags, and then once more the oxen toiled on.

'What did you say he'd got, again?' queried Charlie, dropping back to where the Doctor rode.

'Catalepsy. He's insensible—fallen over the cliffs, or been thrown over.'

'That would kill him right away, though,' replied Charlie, with a glance at the high cliffs towering above them.

'Yes, if he fell clear; but he didn't. His hands are all skinned on the inside, and the flesh is almost all torn off one finger. I expect he fell from one of the ledges to another, and at last got a grip and climbed down.'

'*Climbed* down! He wouldn't have cata—cata—what d'ye call it?—if he *climbed* down, would he?'

'It depends,' said the Doctor slowly. 'We'll hear all about it soon.'

'I wonder how long he's been lying there, poor beggar!' Charlie ventured again.

'About twenty-four hours, at most—probably not so long. I wonder his mates didn't miss him.'

The Doctor was silent; perhaps he was engaged in speculation as to the cause of the accident—if it was an accident. Perhaps, in the certainty that it was not, he was picturing, with a vividness which came of experience, the feelings of those who had but a short while ago travelled away from this

pleasant oasis, leaving behind them a comrade—helpless and alone; or maybe he was looking back once more into the past, and seeing beyond the silvery moonlit sands two sightless eyes upturned to his, and a pain-laden voice murmuring, 'I'm blind! I'm blind!'

CHAPTER V.

A FUNERAL CEREMONY.

Soon after sunrise next morning Welldridge awakened Dixon, and the two started off southward to meet their companions. The tragedy of the previous evening had exercised a most depressing influence upon them, and though neither man acknowledged that he was glad to get away from the form of their late companion, which lay so quiet and motionless, there was no doubt that this feeling, more than any anxiety on account of the Doctor and Charlie, was responsible for their early departure.

On reaching the hill which overlooked the gully which in after days was named after Welldridge himself, they heard the distant cracking of a whip, and looking south-west discerned the cart slowly traversing the valley—later on to be known to them as Beautiful Valley.

Their surprise on learning of the addition to their

party was intensified when, on viewing the face of the still insensible stranger, Welldridge, in a tone of astonishment, exclaimed:

'Why, it's Clem Hay!'

'Do you know him?' interrogated McIntyre.

'Well, I ought to, considering that I worked for his father when this chap was a youngster no higher than that. Old John Hay, of Carrawinnie, was one of the whitest men that ever stepped; and from what I know of Clem, he is a chip of the old block.'

'Well, that's good news,' said Don McIntyre. 'A comrade like that is worth picking up.'

'Will he live, though?' asked Welldridge, anxiously peering down at the unconscious man's face. 'He don't look like being a comrade for very long.'

'Oh, I think so; in fact, I am almost sure he will pull through,' responded McIntyre cheerfully.

They stood round the dray for a few minutes looking at the tall, powerfully-built figure, which was clad only in a stained flannel shirt, rough moleskin trousers and heavy boots. It was a strong, bronzed, determined face, the lower part covered by a short beard, originally brown, but now clotted with blood and sand.

'He looks a powerful fellow,' said Dixon.

'I guess he is too,' replied Welldridge. 'He was one of the best athletes at his college, and when he came up to Carrawinnie, just before his father's illness,

he could hold his own with the best man on the station. Well, well,' he added, after a pause, 'to think of young Clem turning up here! He was no end of a swell at one time, before things went wrong on the station.'

'He's not much of a swell now, poor beggar!'

'No. I don't know the rights of it, but there was some dirty work on the station, and I heard Clem found himself next door to a beggar when the old man died. I lost sight of him for a while, but I heard that he went droving, or overseering, in Queensland a year or two ago.'

'I wonder,' said Dixon presently, when the dray was again in motion—'I wonder who it was that threw him over the cliff.'

'*Threw* him over?'

'Yes; the Doctor said he had been thrown down.'

'Not much, he wasn't!' said Welldridge contemptuously. 'Clem is not the man to be pitched over a cliff like that. Look at the build of him, man!'

On arrival at the main gully, they lifted Hay gently from the waggon and conveyed him to the site of their predecessors' camp, and placed him under the shade of a tree. Before very long the tarpaulin was rigged over the spot where one of the tents had formerly been pitched, a bush bedstead was speedily arranged for his reception, and by the time Charlie

had set free the bullocks and packhorses, their guest was comfortably settled in his quarters, a fire had been lighted, and the water in the billy was bubbling and spluttering.

'We've got something else to do before breakfast, boys,' said the Doctor, as they grouped round the opening of the shelter wherein their new comrade lay—'we've got to dig a grave for that other poor fellow. You get breakfast ready, Charlie, and we'll go off before the sun gets hotter.'

They chose a quiet spot near the junction of the main gully with a smaller one, afterwards named Smith's Gully in memory of the man they buried there—a small plateau covered with low bushes, and overlooking the course of the stream of which he had drunk so unwisely.

Charlie had a substantial meal ready for them on their return, and when that was disposed of, they made a rough litter, and bore the body of their comrade to his last resting-place.

There was a little awkwardness about the interment, for after they had lowered the body, no one seemed inclined to fill in the grave. It seemed to all of them that there was something wanting, something omitted, and yet no one took the initiative, till Charlie, with a tenderness for which no one would have credited him, stepped back among the trees, and reappeared with a long slab of bark,

which he lowered until it rested on the blanketed form below.

'Can't you remember something of the burial service?' muttered Welldridge to McIntyre.

Don hesitated a moment.

'I don't remember much,' he said presently. 'I've heard it often enough, too, God knows.'

Some fragments of the burial service came into his mind as he spoke.

'I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord. He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. . . .

'And though after my death shall worms devour this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. . . .

'We bring our years to an end, as it were a tale that is told. . . .

'As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.'

They stood bareheaded in the morning sunshine, four rough travel-stained men. In the intervals of the Doctor's sentences there came to their ears the murmur of the little stream, the slight sighing of the wind in the tree-tops above them, and into their hearts crept a vague feeling of the pitifulness of life, of the wonder and strangeness of it. Perhaps, too, an indefinite feeling of injustice against the power which after leading the dead man safely through the

perils and dangers of the desert struck him down now in the moment of success.

Dixon turned the tenor of their thoughts by dropping a handful of earth into the grave, and the sound of it pouring upon the bark awoke them to action.

'He will rest quietly enough here, poor fellow!' said Welldridge, as they finished their work; 'but it is hard lines.'

They had so many things to do, however, and their retreat was so new and novel after the weary wastes over which they had so long been travelling, that they soon returned to the camp, and began the day's work. And, indeed, it must always be so, not only in the lonely Bush, but in the crowded city. Tears for the dead make way for smiles for the living; the heart that is oppressed with the littleness of everyday life and the wonder and fear of death grows light in the fulfilment of those same small duties, and in a little while the wonder dies, and fear for the future is lost in present care.

Through all the noise they made—the dull thud of the axe, the rasping of the saw, the cross fire of questions and answers as the men worked around him—the stranger lay undisturbed. At intervals Don McIntyre looked in, and assured himself as to his patient's condition; but there was no change, and the loudest noise failed to awake him.

Perhaps they were glad to work and banish the thoughts of the ceremony in which they had lately taken part, for they went at it with a will—somewhat silently just at first—but ere long in much their ordinary style. The Doctor was architect in chief, and under his directions they were building a wattle and daub hut of considerable dimensions.

'We may as well be comfortable while we are here,' Don had said when they commenced.

All day long the work went on. The trees were felled and lopped, post-holes sunk, and while the Doctor busied himself in fashioning the rough frames for a door and window, Welldridge made the door itself—a couple of sections of bullock hide laced across a framework of stout branches. Before sundown the work had made good progress, and on the following day they had the satisfaction of completing it. The door was fastened to its leather hinges, the roof thatched with the long coarse grass which grew near the upper end of the water-hole, the stores carefully piled up at one end, bunks erected, and, finally, Clem Hay was installed in the most cosy corner, and Don, pleased as a boy at the success of their efforts, had persisted in placing a few embers from the camp-fire in the newly-built fireplace.

He was in one of his rare humours on this day,

bustling about from the lately-erected hut to the camp-fire, and from thence to the open shaft. He seemed incapable of keeping still; and when their evening meal was ready, in spite of Welldridge's objections, he insisted on its being eaten inside their new domicile.

'It's twice as pleasant outside,' argued Welldridge.

'Well, you can come outside again afterwards, but *this* dinner has got to be eaten *inside*. It's our "house-warming."'

He carried his point, as he always did when he set his heart upon anything, however trivial, and even Welldridge forgot to grumble at his 'tomfoolery,' as he designated it, when the Doctor ushered them in to their repast.

'You're like a girl, McIntyre,' the other said, as he stepped into the hut and saw the rough table covered with a newly-washed, half-dried, and all-too-short towel, upon which was displayed a more than ordinarily appetising variety of viands.

There was a savoury mess of crushed biscuits and tinned meat which had been baked in the camp oven, a steaming billy full of soup made from compressed vegetables and biltong, a hot, crisp damper flanked a pile of johnny cakes, and in the centre stood the inevitable billy of tea.

It was a dinner they all remembered. Don, like a

young housewife, was unaffectedly delighted at the encomiums lavished on his cooking, and urged Charlie on to fresh exertions, until the bullock-driver, in order to distract his attention, rose gravely upon the case on which he had been sitting, and, pannikin in hand, made an appealing gesture.

'Mates all,' he said, 'here's luck!'

They drank the toast heartily in their milkless and sugarless tea, and then adjourned to the open air to smoke their pipes. Led on by Welldridge's occasional questions, the Doctor began telling anecdotes, and from these he branched off, to Charlie's delight, into reminiscences of his life in various parts of the world. The evening wore on, the air grew cooler, the fire blazed brightly a few yards away, and presently Don got out his violin and played to them rollicking songs from the Rhineland, soldier songs, all fire and patriotism, plantation melodies, one or two little French ditties, and then, as it grew later, a few slow chords and

> 'Home, home, sweet, sweet home,
> There's no place like home.'

'And now I'm going to turn in,' said Don, putting away his instrument. 'To-morrow we begin our treasure-hunting.'

They went in, a little unwillingly, for it was pleasant to lie about on their blankets and listen

to the music; but they did not go to bed just then, for as they stumbled one after another into the unlighted hut, a sound from the far corner arrested their attention.

It was the lately-rescued stranger muttering in his delirium.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH THE STRANGER LOSES HIS TEMPER.

On the following morning, leaving the Doctor in charge of the invalid, Welldridge and the others started work in earnest. The windlass was rigged, a rough troughing, made from the provision boxes and lined with blanketing, was erected at a convenient spot, and in spite of the smallness of their number a great deal of work was done.

'It's just like that stuff at Pilgrims',' Welldridge said to McIntyre when they met at mid-day, 'only richer. We shall get more out of the fine gold we collect in the blankets than from nuggets as far as I can see.'

'I suppose,' said Don, 'that fellow Hay and his mates took the cream of it.'

'They got a good pile, I dare say, but they worked the thing shockingly. We shall have to timber a lot before we finish.'

Don looked thoughtful.

'We've not got a very long supply of provisions, and we cannot kill more than one bullock, or else how shall we get down?'

'Bah!' laughed Welldridge; 'don't let that trouble you, Doctor. We can eat all seven bullocks and a couple of horses into the bargain; we shan't want to take the dray back.'

'Do you think the nags will stand it?'

'Oh, they will be as fit as fiddles by the time we leave here; there is plenty of grass and water . . . and there is another way of getting back. I didn't say anything before, because Smith's death and this Hay's appearance put it out of my head; but while you were away I tracked off the spoor of the rest of Hay's party . . . there is a camel-pad as plain as print all down the valley, and then striking out south-westerly. I reckon we shall get out all right; don't let that trouble you.'

'How's the patient, Doctor?' interrupted Dixon.

'Rambling a good deal. He does not seem to be such a saint as you made out, Welldridge, judging from his talk.'

'Oh, Clem isn't a saint—never said he was—but he's a good straight fellow, for all that.'

'He has been using a most bloodthirsty lot of threats against someone all the morning, and his

vocabulary of swear words is remarkably extensive,' retorted Don dryly.

'Let's have a look at him.

They all moved towards the door and looked in. A blanket had been fastened across both door and window to keep out the sun, and the hut was in semi-darkness; but they could just distinguish the outlines of the big fellow in the far corner, and his mutterings were distinctly audible.

'What?' he was saying in a sneering tone—'what? I mustn't put my hand to my ear? You will, will you? Curse you! I'm falling—I'm falling, you murdering hound!'

Welldridge looked thoughtful as they dropped the blanket and left the man to the Doctor's care.

'I remember something about Clem being a bit deaf,' he said presently. 'He could hear well enough when I knew him. I expect one of his mates jeered him about being hard of hearing, and they had a fight; that would account for his falling over the cliff.'

'How many mates had he, I wonder,' said Dixon.

'Well, now, that's just what puzzles me. There are four camel-pads and only one man's track where they were loaded up. There must have been more than two of them here, though.'

'There were only two bunks,' suggested Charlie.

'Yes. I suppose we shall know all about it soon;

the Doctor says he will pull through, and, by Jove! I hope he will, for we want all the hands we can get.'

But they worked for many days before they had the assistance of either Don McIntyre or his mysterious patient. Day after day passed by without any change in the patient's condition, and Welldridge, Dixon, and Charlie began to think they would have to do all the mining work by themselves, for between nursing and cooking Don McIntyre had no time to assist them. As Welldridge had foretold, a good deal of timbering was needed to make the shaft secure, and it had been an arduous task to cut the trees, drag them up to the shaft, and fix them in position; but that was all finished now, and the water had been diverted just below the source of the spring, and brought by a small channel down past the shaft. From thence it fell into the long troughing, composed in its first section of roughly-hollowed trees lined with blanketing strips, and in the other section of a long shallow trough made from the various provision boxes and cases. All day long the two men below filled and refilled the bucket with the gold-laden earth, and all day long the third man toiled ceaselessly, hauling up and returning the bucket, and giving an occasional push to the last deposited lot of soil to send it well into the little whirling muddy stream, which presently

carried it down over the slope and along the gully, till it emptied itself into the original channel from which it had been diverted.

In spite of the hardships of their journey, Welldridge had kept a time reckoning, and the seventh day was duly observed as a day of rest, perhaps not so much from religious feeling as from the absolute necessity for some relaxation from the severe toil.

On the second Sunday morning after their arrival McIntyre suggested that as his patient was asleep they should test the value of the work done—a proposal that met with general acquiescence. It took only a few minutes for Charlie to dam the channel and let the waters of the spring resume their natural course. The others, standing at the head of the troughing, saw the water shrink and disappear, and presently the first two blanket strips were carefully dislodged and deposited in the only buckets which the adventurers possessed. Leaving these to soak and disgorge their treasures later on, they strolled down beside the blanketed troughing, stopping here and there to lift the wooden obstructions which had been placed at intervals to secure possible nuggets.

'The fall is too steep in my opinion,' said Dixon; 'all the nuggets will get washed clear by the force of the water.'

Welldridge smiled.

'Not they,' he said reassuringly. 'What do you

call this?' He stooped forward as he spoke, and lifted a small lump which had got wedged in between the leaf of the trough. 'Half an ounce if it's a grain,' he said, as he handed it to the others.

They spent but little time in examining it, though, for each man was anxious to get to the next section, where the largest find was most probable, the fall at this point being too acute for any substance, however heavy, to be retained unless wedged as the first nugget had been.

'My Gow!' cried Charlie, as he scrambled down the rough path and glanced at the first barrier; 'look at 'em!'

There were half a dozen nuggets, each about the size of a thimble, and washed clear of all earth and débris by the force of the water. They lay in the dried-up channel, showing clean and unmistakable against the dark colour of the blanketing.

'Hurrah!' yelled Dixon enthusiastically; 'this is something like!'

They were all excited; even Welldridge, cool and self-possessed as he generally was, joined in the shout which rose spontaneously on the air, as the adventurers looked upon the spoil of their hands and assured themselves by rapid glances downward that there was more good fortune to follow.

'Don't be an ass, Charlie,' cried McIntyre warningly, as the bullock-driver performed an uncouth

step-dance on the summit of a projecting boulder; 'you'll break your neck.'

But Charlie was beyond restraint. Finishing off his dance with one wild whoop of delight and a final astounding exhibition of high kicking, he lost his balance and rolled ignominiously from the bank and into the creek.

When their chaff had died out, and they had returned to camp for breakfast, another surprise was in store for them. The door of the hut was still closed and darkened, but the blanket over the window-frame had been drawn aside, and peering out upon them with a mingled expression of surprise and doubt was the face of their invalided guest.

They all hurried forward, but McIntyre was the first to reach him.

'Feeling better?' he asked smilingly, as he met the other man's look of curiosity.

'I'm feeling confoundedly stiff,' was the reply, given in a gruff voice. 'How long have you been here, and what has happened?'

'You must have something to eat before I let you talk,' said McIntyre. 'Fetch over that pot, Charlie.'

The stranger submitted in silence to be led back to his bed and fed upon the strong, rich soup which McIntyre had constantly kept stewing by the fire; but when he had swallowed as much as the Doctor would allow, he returned to his question.

'What has happened?' he asked suspiciously.

Don led him back to the window.

'Don't you know where you are?' he said questioningly.

The man glanced about him carelessly.

'I guess I ought to,' he retorted. 'I'm on my own claim. But how did you get here? How did you rig this hut? Where is——'

'One question at a time,' said Don gaily. 'I'll introduce myself first. I'm Donald McIntyre, a duly qualified medical practitioner, my friend.'

'Oh!' exclaimed the stranger; 'are you the mad Doctor?'

Don laughed.

'I've heard that some people called me that.'

The stranger looked at him attentively.

'I heard a good bit about you at Coolgardie,' he said reflectively.

'Well, if it comes to that, I heard a good deal about you, too, my friend,' retorted Don, nettled at the man's bluntness.

'Oh, I don't care what you heard about me; how did you fellows come to be here at all?'

He tottered back to his bunk as he spoke, and when he was comfortably stretched upon it, Don told him of his meeting with Caffyn, and the manner of the latter's death. As the story proceeded, the man's face changed. A glimpse of memory seemed

to irradiate his mind; he sat up on the bed and listened eagerly, while from time to time he scanned his bandaged hands and seemed to be awaiting some clue to his present predicament.

Suddenly he leaned forward with an impetuous movement and smote his injured hands together. His eyes flashed with rage, and after a furious look around the hut and a vain effort to rise, he fell back on the blankets in a paroxysm of passion.

'Gently, man, gently!' remonstrated the Doctor. 'I see you remember everything now, but you will only do yourself harm by getting angry.'

'Angry!' retorted the other. 'Do you know what my mate did? Do you know he pushed me off those cliffs up yonder and left me out there to die?'

'I know something of that sort happened, but it was your own fault that you lay there so long.'

The man stared.

'You seem to know all about it,' he said sneeringly.

'I know this,' said Don impressively: 'you didn't fall sheer from the cliffs. Whether you fell or were pushed off, I can't say, but you broke your fall by clutching at the ridges, and you spoiled your own chance of escape by giving way to an ungovernable burst of temper which culminated in a cataleptic fit.'

'And where might *you* have been all the time?' asked his hearer in blank astonishment.

'Out in the desert.'

'How did you know, then?'

'Your hands told me part of it; your mutterings in your delirium did the rest.'

He could see the heavy frown settling on the man's face again, as the memory of his wrongs returned to him, and by way of diverting his thoughts, Don called to Welldridge to enter the hut.

'He is an old friend of yours,' he explained to the sick man; 'he told us all about you.'

'The devil he did!' ejaculated the other. 'Send him along,' he added in a curious tone a moment later.

'How do you do?' he said grimly as Phil Welldridge stepped in. 'I hear you claim to be a friend of mine?'

'Well,' said Phil pleasantly, 'I hope I am, my boy; I owe your dad too many kindnesses not to have a feeling of friendship for his son; besides,' he added, looking somewhat blankly at the enigmatical expression on the other man's face, 'you know you and me were always good friends at Carrawinnie.'

'Ah!' said the other, as if he understood the allusion; 'you remember me at Carrawinnie, eh?'

'Of course, my lad. Don't you remember *me?*' he asked, half holding out his hand and looking into the younger man's face—'Phil Welldridge.'

'Oh!' groaned the other with a gesture of uncontrollable rage, 'it's intolerable, it's damnable!'

He clenched his bandaged hands together again, and twisted them till the blood-stains showed through the coverings, and Welldridge, rising hurriedly, called out to the Doctor.

'He's not right in his head,' he muttered to Don; 'he does not remember me a bit.'

The stranger had quick ears, after all, for Welldridge had no sooner spoken than he replied:

'I am quite right in my head, my friend, but as to remembering you, I never saw or heard of you before; and as for Carrawinnie, d—n it! I was never there in my life, and I wish it and everybody connected with it were at the bottom of the sea!'

'Now look here, Clem Hay,' remonstrated Welldridge.

But the other did not heed him. At the mention of his name he gave a despairing gesture, and threw himself back on his bed; and Don, signing to Welldridge to leave them, devoted himself to his patient.

'He was bad enough before,' said Phil, when he rejoined the others, 'but when I called him by his own name he just shut up like a knife. I never saw such a change in a fellow.'

BOOK II.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERER

A LONG-LEGGED, handsome youth was leaning one bright English summer afternoon against an old-fashioned stile which gave access from Orminster Mill to a quiet country lane on the outskirts of Orminster, one of the prettiest of Somersetshire towns.

Every now and then the lad's face brightened as some thought flashed through his mind, and was hastily jotted down in a small note-book which already held a goodly number of entries. On the top of one of the stile-posts lay a small volume, kept open by a stone, and from time to time, after scanning its pages, the lad recited to himself in an undertone the Greek verses which he was studying.

He made a pleasant picture as he leaned there: his large gray eyes, now half closed as he weighed

the sentences in his mind, now widely opened and luminous as the meaning became clearer; at one moment with his hand arrested in the air, and later on with fingers drumming nervously upon the rough rail, while all the time his head nodded or shook in assent or doubt in a manner which might have savoured of the ludicrous to a casual observer.

But it was plain that he feared no intruder in this quiet spot, and had abandoned himself completely to the task of translating the grand lines of the Greek poet into English; nor did his ambition cease here, for as he translated every few lines, he wrote against the literal translation any more sonorous or striking phrases which might, by poetic license, be taken as equivalents, his obvious intention being not only to obtain an English translation, but to mould the translation into English verse.

Suddenly, as with fingers poised hesitatingly in the air, he closed his eyes in a determined effort to seize and crystallize a fleeting, shadowy thought, which, while it evaded him, yet seemed to linger wantonly only just beyond the limits of his mental grasp, a strong hand fell upon his shoulder, and a deep, pleasant voice sounded almost against his ears:

'Can you tell me where Mrs. Pontifex lives?'

The lad started back with a gesture of despair, oblivious of everything but the fact that the half-formed thought had been rudely disturbed.

'*Confound you!*' he shouted angrily, regarding the intruder on his solitude with wrathful eyes, from which all the brooding introspective look had fled; 'what did you startle me like that for?'

The new-comer—a tall, lithe fellow with a short brown beard, clear, steady gray-blue eyes, and sun-tanned face, who had bent his head close to the abstracted student at first, stared in surprise at the tempest he had raised.

'I did not mean to startle you,' he said good-naturedly, 'but I've got off the track, and want to find out where a Mrs. Pontifex lives.'

'My mother is Mrs. Pontifex,' the lad said slowly, as he eyed the few lines which still remained to be translated; then, catching the stranger's inquiring look, he laughed shyly as he explained the manner of his employment, and why he had been so vexed at being disturbed. 'But I beg your pardon for being cross,' he said apologetically, 'and that is where we live, over in that cottage. Will you come with me?'

As they walked down the pleasant Somersetshire lane, the man appeared anxious but afraid to speak. At last he stopped, and said awkwardly:

'Your mother is well?'

'Oh yes, mother is fairly well . . .' and then, as a sudden thought crossed his mind, he regarded his companion more attentively, noting the unfamiliar

broad-brimmed felt hat and puggaree, the indefinable something in his other attire, which, while he could not exactly say where any one detail was peculiar, yet, as a whole, seemed to impress him as being strange.

'I say,' he said, 'you're not Joe, are you?'

The man bent towards him as he spoke as though to catch the question.

'Eh?' he said, 'Joe! Oh no, I am not Joe.'

'You know him though?'

'Ye-es,' came the answer slowly, 'I used to know him.'

'Come on, then! come on! Mother will be delighted to see you; she is always thinking of Joe. . . . I say,' he added in a lower voice, 'Joe's terribly wild, isn't he?'

The man patiently bent his head.

'He's what?'

'Wild—full of larks and that?'

'No, he is not wild—not now.'

A gleam of fun came into the boy's eyes.

'It is Joe himself,' he muttered under his breath, 'and he has come home "a good boy."'

With light, eager steps he led the man a little way down the lane, and through a rickety gate into an old-fashioned, sweet-smelling garden, and then with a glance behind to make sure he was followed, sped off towards the cottage shouting:

'Mother! mother!'

It seemed as though the newcomer was in two minds as to whether he would follow his guide or beat a retreat while the way was still clear, for he walked slowly and hesitatingly, with many backward glances toward the gate through which he had just passed.

Perhaps he did not hear the faint rustle of a woman's dress, or perhaps he was too busily engaged with his own thoughts to heed aught else; but, as he followed the winding path, he came suddenly face to face with a little fragile woman with snow-white hair and eyes dimmed with age and sorrow—still further dimmed just now by tears which she made no effort to wipe away, and which trickled down the poor wan face and fell all unheeded upon the rusty mourning dress; and, indeed, she could not have wiped the tears away, for, as she drew near, she outstretched her arms towards the man, and cried with a pitiful quaver in her voice:

'Oh, Joe! My boy! my boy! Come home at last!'

What could he do but clasp her in his arms as she came to him? What could he do but kiss the old worn face that, tear-stained as it was, seemed beautiful with that patient, pathetic beauty which comes only to the faces of those who have feared, and hoped, and waited long.

If the lad, looking on from the cottage porch, detected an awkwardness and something of stiffness in the man's manner in the first moments of the meeting, he could not find fault on the score of his tenderness and gentleness afterwards; for, as he caught the plaintive cry and looked upon the tired face of the old lady, there surged up in his own a rapt expression—an illumination under which his eyes grew soft and loving, and, as he stooped and gathered her in his arms and kissed her, he whispered:

'Yes, dear, your boy has come home—at last, to make you very, very happy if he can.'

She started slightly as his voice fell upon her ears, and raised the head she had pillowed against his broad breast, only to let it droop again as she caught his wistful, humble look.

'How deep your voice has become!' she said.

Perhaps he did not hear her, for he made no reply, but supported her carefully to the cottage door.

The boy made way for them silently, noting with a little jealous pain how radiant the mother's face had grown.

'It will be Joe, Joe, Joe, all day long!' he muttered to himself half sadly, half whimsically, as he followed them in.

A little later—when the three were seated in the tiny sitting-room, the mother contentedly clinging to one of the wanderer's hands—it dawned upon the

younger lad that there was something unusual about his newly-arrived brother.

'Why, Joe,' he said, 'you're not *deaf*, are you?'

Joe flushed.

'Yes,' he said, 'I am deaf.'

They understood now why his replies to their questions were sometimes irrelevant, and why, with one hand slightly hollowed behind his ear, he rested his arm upon the table; and for a moment there was silence till the mother, with tender solicitude, kissed the brown hand she held in hers, and needs must know how such an affliction had befallen him.

It was a long story of an illness so serious that his life had been despaired of, and from which he awoke to consciousness with an uneasy feeling as of something missing, though what it was he could not at first discover. At last it flashed across him that his hearing was dulled. Later on, he became almost used to the affliction, which the doctor made light of; but as his bodily strength came back, and he began to piece things together, he found his mind a blank so far as concerned many things which he wished to recall; and when he left the hospital with his physical strength fully recovered, he knew himself to be not only deaf, but still more cruelly stricken, in that he had lost his memory of almost everything prior to his accident. Sometimes, as he wandered about forlornly, an idea or recollection

would intrude itself upon him of his boyhood's days; but, in the shock of his affliction, he could not tell whether it was an absolute recollection of one of his own past experiences, or only a memory of some story he had read or heard.

Bit by bit he learned from others some fragments of his own life in the Colonies, and, piecing these with the errant memories which haunted him, he sketched in his life roughly in his own imagination. He knew there was a home circle in Orminster, and, after a while, he determined to make his way thither; not, as he explained, half shamedly, to take up again his old place amongst them, since he could not remember what that place was, but to come in the guise of a stranger, and help them with the money he had won from the far distant gold-fields, on his return from which he had been stricken down by illness.

And, he acknowledged timidly, when he had placed them beyond the fear of poverty, he had a half-formed plan of watching over them from a distance—of being their protector; not discovering himself to them lest they might feel ashamed of the useless deaf fellow who, in spite of his size and strength, had no memory of his childhood's days, nor could join in an ordinary conversation without bringing ridicule upon himself and discomfort upon others.

He spoke timidly, and even awkwardly, of his

purposed proceedings; and, as he explained his feelings, his words came more and more slowly, for the mother's tears fell hot and fast, and from her eyes reproachful love looked into his, and her mute pain cut him like a knife.

'Indeed, indeed,' he said, stung by her reproachful looks, 'I thought it would be best; you can hardly understand it all yet. You see, I am doing all the talking now, and my affliction is not so apparent; but when you speak to me, I answer away from the point. Oh, I cannot tell you what it is to be a man, and young and strong, and yet to know that it is in the power of the smallest child to make me foolish and ill at ease! I have had some education, yet the veriest lout could, by a few low-spoken words, put me to shame and make me a laughing-stock! At first it was even worse than it is now. I *could* not say, "I am deaf" to people; I feared to see the blank surprise in their faces, the covert smiles and sneers! I used to try and pass their questions by, in the futile hope that by talking fast, and of something interesting, I should elude or stave off discovery. It may seem cowardly—still it was so; I could not bear to be branded as different from other men. I discovered, after a while, that in a carriage on the railway line, or in any other place where the outside noise necessitated the raising of one's voice, I could hear fairly well; and so before I came home—while

I was still plotting my poor play—I used to ride upon the Adelaide tramcars, and enter into promiscuous talk with the passengers. It used to make me feel happier for the time; but even then I had to be on the alert, and bridge over the spaces during which the cars stopped; and sooner or later my companions would detect me, my defect would stand revealed, and I would feel the bitterness of being unlike, and apart from, my fellow men. Upon the steamer, coming home, I used to sit in the machine-room and chat with the stokers or others off duty. You can hardly understand what it was to me, those little chats above the great throbbing engine, which I learned to regard as a friend. Just for the while I could forget my deafness and be as other men, or seem to be; perhaps my fellow-passengers laughed at me, but the happiest hours I ever spent after my illness were in the close, warm atmosphere of the engine-room of the *Orient*.'

Mrs. Pontifex's heart was so full of conflicting emotions that she could not speak, and as Joe's voice ceased, and silence reigned in the cottage, the lad Jack gave an opening for a less painful theme.

'Tell us how you made all the money, Joe—unless you've forgotten,' he added doubtfully.

He told them of the Antipodes, of his wild nomadic life in the various colonies; of Broken Hill, with its silver mines, holding almost fabulous wealth; of the

great runs, or stations, containing thousands of square miles; of the lonely Australian Bush, with its weird fascination, its curious flora and fauna, its aboriginals, its deserts, and its tales of heroism and death; and they, except when some strange word demanded an explanation, sat silent and absorbed, the mother nestling close to her first-born, the lad with his elbows on his knees and his chin supported on his hands.

The recital was in full progress when a shadow fell across the open doorway, and a clear girl-voice cried out: 'Mother! mother! Where are you?' and directly afterwards a tall, slight girl stepped in, shading her eyes with her hands. 'The sun is just going down, and it nearly blinded me,' she said, as she took off the broad straw hat she wore; 'and—oh!'

'It's Joe, Ethel—our Joe!' her mother cried.

And the lad, still sitting chin in hand, observant of them all, noticing the start Joe gave at the apparition, supplemented his mother's words with:

'It's only Eth, Joe!'

Probably Joe did not hear him. He had risen, and was standing awkwardly by his chair, as though in doubt what to do; but the girl, after a second's unbelief at the possibility of such good news, uttered a little impulsive cry, and, springing forward, wreathed her arms about him, drew his tall head down to hers, and kissed him rapturously.

'Oh, Joe! I *am* so glad!'

Only the quiet lad noticed the astonishment and dismay which crept over Joe's sunburnt face at the girl's entrance; only Jack saw the troubled look give way to a ludicrous look of bewilderment as the girl threw her arms round him and kissed him.

'I say, Eth, you're doing it all. He isn't kissing you a little bit.'

'I believe I am,' she said, half merrily, half reproachfully, as she disengaged herself and let her arms fall to her sides. 'Now, Joe,' she said, 'give me a nice kiss, and a hug all by your own self!'

Joe's eyes glanced over the girl's figure in bewilderment, not unmixed with alarm; and as he met her bright eyes looking at him with a whimsical affectation of coquetry, the colour flooded his sun-tanned face.

'He's blushing! Look, Eth, he's blushing!' cried Jack hilariously.

As he spoke, Joe took a stiff step forward, but the girl drew back wounded, the merry face clouded and the young lips tremulous.

'Have you forgotten little Eth, Joe?' she said reproachfully.

Perhaps he had; his eyes showed no light of recognition; but as he bent over her, and heard her pretty voice, and saw in the fading light the sorrow in her young face, he took her in his arms and kissed her

reverently, holding her from him afterwards, and scanning her girlish beauty in silent admiration.

She flushed, and looked at him shyly.

'Have you *forgotten* me?' she asked again.

'It is all so strange,' he answered, not meeting her eyes. 'I have been ill—so ill that my memory and my hearing are both gone—I am deaf—dear.'

He spoke the last words as though they pained him, and hesitated over the term of endearment as though half frightened at his own temerity.

'But you are not so very deaf, dear Joe,' his mother said soothingly. 'You can hear me, and I am not speaking loud at all—am I, Eth?' she asked her daughter wistfully.

'No, indeed. And, besides, there are some very, *very* clever doctors in London; they will soon cure you, Joe. Of course, in Australia you could not expect to find *good* doctors.'

'Don't you think so?' he replied, with a brief smile. 'It seems marvellous to hear English people speak of Australia—to see how they misunderstand its magnitude and progress.'

'But,' interposed Jack, 'there are famous *specialists* in London. You could not get *them* in Australia!'

'There are plenty of specialists there too,' Joe said sadly. 'I tried them all—I even went to a "faith-healer" once, but he did me no good. Still, I might try a specialist again by-and-by.'

'Of course,' said Jack, 'you've got lots of money, and it will not be very expensive.'

And just then Mrs. Pontifex was struck with a sudden happy thought, and left the room hurriedly. Coming back presently with a long case in her hands, she put it before the wanderer.

'Joe,' she said, with a pathetic smile, 'do you remember it?'

'It's a violin,' he said wonderingly. 'Was it my father's?'

It vexed him to see them look at each other in astonished grief.

'Well, whose was it, then?' he asked.

'It was yours, Joe. You were never very brilliant at school, but you always loved music. Take it out, dear, and see if the old talent has left you.'

He took it out gingerly, and drew the bow across the strings.

'Oh, I've forgotten *everything!*' he muttered, putting it down hastily.

His sister's eyes filled with tears.

'Never mind, Joe dear,' she said, trying to speak brightly; 'it will all come back to you some day.' And then, in the hope of diverting his mind, she asked: 'Have you really come home rich? How did you do it, Joe—gold-digging?'

'Yes, gold-digging. I made it all like that,' he answered, almost gruffly.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH JOE LEARNS SOME OF HIS OWN HISTORY.

Ethel and the little maid who was their sole domestic had cleared the table after the evening meal was finished, and they had drawn their chairs close round the tiny fire, which had only been lit because Ethel said it looked 'cosy,' and would remind Joe of Australia, when Jack gave vent to a sudden ejaculation.

'Oh, shall I run up to the Parsonage and bring Mr. Varrow and Amy down? Fancy our forgetting Amy!'

Both mother and daughter glanced inquiringly at Joe as his brother spoke, but he made no sign, and the lad went on:

'Is Amy one of the things you've forgotten, Joe?'

'Jack! Jack!' his sister cried reprovingly, while Mrs. Pontifex bent over Joe's chair and kissed him.

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'Would you like them to come, dear?' she said—'just Amy and her father?'

'Why,' he asked apprehensively, 'who are they?'

The two women exchanged pitying looks, but Jack's laugh rang out loud and clear.

'Oh, Joe! that is too bad. Why, you wanted to elope with Amy when you were only nineteen, and, besides,' he added suddenly, 'you never wrote to us all the time you were away, and you *did* write to her. How can you have forgotten her? Why, you are *engaged!*'

'I have forgotten her,' Joe answered despondingly. 'Did I really do—that?' he asked his mother.

'Yes,' she said. 'You were both very young and wilful; it seems incredible that you should have forgotten it. It was the cause of your final quarrel with your poor father, and the cause of your leaving home. Do you not remember it at all?' she asked wonderingly.

He shook his head, and gazed gloomily in the fire.

'It would have been better if I had adopted the course I first intended,' he muttered. 'You are beginning to see it now; later on you will see it more clearly.'

His mother and sister tried to cheer him from the moodiness which fell upon him, but in their hearts wonderment and regret fought with their pity, and the brightness of the girl's face was clouded, while

Jack, afraid to say more, sat apart and watched them.

'You remember writing to Amy, Joe?' the girl asked presently.

'No; I don't remember writing,' he said drearily. 'I suppose it was before my memory went; her very name seems unfamiliar.'

'Well, then, we will not trouble about them, but have a nice long evening all to ourselves,' the old lady said, trying to speak cheerily.

'Yes; and we must make the most of our opportunities,' Ethel cried in the same strain, 'for when it once gets about that "wild Joe Pontifex" has come home, the cottage will be regularly besieged. You are the hero of all the young rascals in the village, Joe. I don't know who tells them all the stories, but they are always full of your boyish escapades.'

'Mother tells them,' said Jack, laughing; 'I've heard her. She is enough to make all the boys wicked. I heard her telling old George's children about Joe lassoing father's mare and nearly choking her to death.'

'But I was only telling them how it was done,' Mrs. Pontifex protested. 'They were telling me of their elder brother who had gone to America, and it made me think of Joe.'

'But it is not only the boys who will want to see

you, Joe,' Ethel said, eagerly watching his face. 'There is Sir John Hamilton, and Maud, and Mr. Ellerby, and Dr. and Mrs. Sackville, and James and Maggie Sackville, and the Clertons and Leightons, and, oh! lots of people.'

She had watched his face closely as she named her friends, hoping to see some sign of recognition; but he made none, only looked at her with patient, wistful eyes, whose looks made her heart ache for him.

'I'll be bound you will soon recollect Maud Hamilton,' said Jack; 'she was speaking of you only a day or two ago. I don't think I *could* forget her—unless I was dead,' he added, half to himself.

His sister gave him a quizzical look, and the lad subsided at once, a slight flush tinging his cheeks, and to hide his confusion he turned and selected a book from the little hanging-shelf on the wall.

'He seems fond of books,' Joe said, nodding towards the lad.

Both Mrs. Pontifex and Ethel hastened to chant Jack's praises.

'Why, Mr. Varrow says he never met such a clever boy in all his life,' cried the mother proudly.

'And he says Jack ought to go to one of the Universities—that he *must*. He says Jack knows more now than any boy of his age, and that it is a crime to keep him from distinguishing himself,' Ethel said eagerly.

'Well, there is no reason why he should not go now,' Joe answered kindly.

'Do you mean it, Joe?'

'Of course I do. You shall choose your own University. Which shall it be—light blue or dark?'

'Oh, dark! Mr. Varrow is an Oxford man himself,' Jack cried, and then, a little nervously, he walked across to his big brother and clasped his hand. 'It's awfully good of you, old chap,' he said gratefully.

'Oh, that's all right; it is almost the first time my money has given me pleasure. And you,' he said, addressing Ethel, 'what is your ambition?'

'To be able to stay at home and look after my old mammy,' she said, slipping her arm about her mother's waist. 'You know I have to teach in the school all day.'

'We must stop *that*. And is that all you want?'

'Yes, thank you, brother Joe,' she said, curtseying to him daintily.

'You are easily pleased,' he said, 'but I think I can find some other things you want—you and—mother.'

He hesitated as he spoke the last word, as he had hesitated all through the evening. It seemed as though through long disuse the old loving title had grown hard to say.

'You want a nice house and plenty of servants to begin with. I'll look out for an estate in one of the other counties, and we can all go up to London and see some house-agents as soon as you like.'

'But we could get plenty of nice houses here in Somersetshire, Joe,' Ethel timidly suggested. 'Mother is so fond of Somerset, and nearly all our friends live either here or in Devonshire.'

'We will see,' he answered evasively. 'The first thing to do is to go to London and make inquiries. You will want to do a lot of shopping, and there is Jack's outfit to be prepared; the sooner we go the better.'

'But I cannot go for several days; I must attend to my school duties. It is lucky the holidays begin at the end of the week; I must stay on till then, at least.'

'Oh yes, that is only fair and straight,' said Joe thoughtfully; 'I could run up and make preliminary inquiries.'

All through the evening, till long past Jack's usual bedtime, they talked of their future, learning incidentally how great was the fortune Joe had brought home; and then, Ethel and Jack having retired to dream of the happy days to come, the wanderer was left alone with his mother.

'Joe dear,' the old lady said, as the door closed upon the others, 'we have scarcely mentioned your father yet; you have not forgotten him?'

Joe shifted uneasily in his seat, and his eyes fell before her entreating look.

'Oh Joe!' she cried, 'you do not mean that you are bitter now—now that he is dead?'

'Oh no—not bitter, only very, very sorry,' he said in a low voice.

'You never heard the details of his death? It was very terrible. He rode away one morning on the old roan mare to go to Barset to see a sick woman; something must have startled the mare, for she came home riderless, and shivering and shaking all over; when Sir John, and the others who went in search of your father, found him, he was unconscious by the roadside. He never spoke again (although he lived for two days) until just before the end. Then he opened his eyes and whispered "Good-bye" to me as I hung over him to catch his words. After a minute he spoke again—"The boy—our Joe—tell him—I—loved—him always—my boy!"—and then he died.'

The tears were flowing freely from the old lady's eyes, and Joe sat silent, engrossed in his own thoughts for several minutes.

'I wish he could have lived to see you again, Joe—to see you so tall and strong and manly—and so gentle!'

'Am I gentle?' he asked with a curious smile. 'I wonder you knew me.'

'Trust a mother to know her own boy! I would know you anywhere; you are not really changed; your hair and eyes are just as they used to be, only your face is older—and you are so brown. The greatest change is in your voice; it used to be gruff or else squeaky; you did not seem to be able to control it. Now it is deep and mellow—a beautiful voice,' she said proudly.

'It can be gruff enough now, I am afraid, but never to you, I hope; but, mother, I have been thinking that since my memory is so bad, and to prevent my paining you by forgetting what I should remember, suppose you tell me all that has happened to me since I was a little fellow, so that I can fill in the missing links in my memory. . . . I cannot remember any of my relatives,' he said tentatively, 'except you three.'

'Dear! You have only two other near relatives—your father's bachelor brothers—your uncles, John and George. My own people have long since passed away, and I was an only child. . . . When your father died I should have been glad to have gone, too, only for the hope of seeing you again, and for my love for Jack and Ethel. Jack is so clever and good, and I cannot tell you what a comfort Ethel is.'

'Shall I have to see my uncles?' he asked apprehensively.

She made a little gesture of surprise.

'It seems so strange that you should have forgotten them,' she said in explanation; 'but I do not think you will see them for some time. They are rich, you know, and spend most of their time on the Continent.'

'Rich! and left you *here!*'

'My dear, I must try to remember that you have forgotten all these things. John and George Pontifex quarrelled with your father, and never spoke to him again because he married *me*.'

'Oh!' he said, 'I remember something of that; and your—my father said if he was not a clergyman he would horsewhip them both for something they said about you.'

'Yes—yes!' she cried. 'Oh, Joe, I *am* so glad you remember that! Perhaps as I go on telling you, the past will all become clear to you; I do so hope it may.'

And then she told him the outlines of his boyish life, of the wild, reckless spirit which seemed to dominate him and be for ever bringing him into disgrace. She told him, too, of his father's stern, unyielding temper, and his determination to curb his son's recklessness, but the severity only hastened the final breach.

She told him, too, of Amy Varrow, his child-sweetheart—almost the only person, besides herself,

who could influence the harum-scarum lad—and presently, with just the faintest tinge of reproach in her voice, she told how the child-love grew with their years, and he, with the impulsiveness which was his chief characteristic, had, when he was nineteen, formally asked Mr. Varrow for Amy; and how, despite the united arguments of the two clergymen, he had persisted in considering himself engaged, and had finally made an unsuccessful attempt at elopement; how Amy had been sent away by her father, and Joe, smarting under his repulse, had forgotten himself and used words which his father would not forgive; and finally she told him of the stormy scene in the old Rectory, from whose windows she had watched her wayward, passionate lad stride angrily towards Orminster, and how that had been the last time she had seen him until now.

He sat listening intently.

'I had no idea that I was so bad as that,' he murmured to himself.

It was past midnight when he lit his mother's bedroom candle for her, and tenderly escorted her to her room; and even when he entered the small apartment which he was to share with Jack, he did not go to bed at once, but taking from his coat a clasped pocket-diary or note-book, he sat upon the bed and wrote a synopsis of all he had heard, and on a separate leaf he wrote:

'Mrs. Pontifex, *née* Grey, no relatives living.
Rev. Joseph Pontifex, died 7 years ago, near Barset.
Joe Pontifex (ME), 29 years old.
Ethel Pontifex, 19 years old.
Jack Pontifex, 16½ years old.
George Pontifex, } my uncles—two old brutes.
John Pontifex, }
Amy Varrow, 27 years old. My old sweetheart.
Rev. Varrow, her father.
Mrs. Varrow, dead.
Maud Hamilton, friend of Ethel's.'

'There,' he muttered, 'I must try and remember that. I wish I had never come. I shall only make them miserable instead of happy.'

Early as Ethel rose next morning, she learned from the little maid that the 'strange gentleman' had long ago risen and gone out—'up the road,' she said vaguely—and with a half fear that something had happened, a foreboding that he had repented of his home-coming, and stolen away to carry out the scheme of which he had spoken, she ran out into the garden. As she did so the window of Jack's bedroom opened, and Jack's head popped out.

'He's not in the garden, Eth. He's gone up the road. I watched him.'

She came close up to the window, and leaned lightly against it, screening her eyes with her hands from the morning sun as she looked towards the roadway.

'I wonder where he went,' she said.

'I believe he has gone away altogether,' Jack answered disappointedly. 'It is too early to get his things from the station. I wonder if he *is* Joe?'

'Jack!'

'Well, I do, there! He did not seem to know *me* a bit, nor you either; besides, he never said a word about you when we were talking before you came home. And how *could* he forget Amy!'

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Jack! The poor fellow! I have been thinking of him all night. It must be terrible to be deaf, and lose one's memory like that; it is very sad. I think,' she said impulsively, 'that we can do lots of things for him, though—explain what people say, you know, and prevent him feeling uncomfortable. Just think of his sitting in the engine-room on the steamer, poor old boy!'

'He is not a boy; he's a man. There are lots of people who are deaf who do not worry over it. Look at old Carter at Winchley Farm—he is happy enough.'

'But then he is old; he has always been deaf. But poor Joe is young, yet. Can't you understand?' she asked impulsively. 'Oh, I have been thinking of it so! You must try and make things easy for him, Jack. Think how good he is to send you to Oxford.'

'Yes,' admitted Jack, 'that was awfully good of him, but I can't understand about his forgetting Amy. How could he?'

'I hope he will remember her when he sees her. Perhaps it will all come home to him with a rush when he finds himself among the familiar faces and places again. I have read of such things, and it is not uncommon for people to lose their memory.'

'Oh, I say, Eth! Why, if fellows were to get like that after a fever or something, what would be the good of grafting and stewing? Why, a fellow would forget everything, and have to begin again.'

'Well, they do, sometimes, I think.'

'I hope I won't get ill, then,' her brother said ruefully. 'It would be horrid. Hullo! here he comes, look! Why, he has been marketing!'

They remained still, the girl leaning against the ivy-covered window with her younger brother's head peering over her shoulder, and watched the tall straight figure approach them. His dull ears had not caught the sound of their voices, and he was quite close before he noticed them.

The brisk walk in the fresh morning air had invigorated and cheered him, and he looked quite bright and happy as he kissed Ethel, and bade Jack good-morning.

'Yes, I've been marketing,' he said gaily, as he produced his stores. 'Look!'

He had ransacked Orminster Market for all the choicest delicacies, and as he showed his treasures his mellow laugh rang out pleasantly.

'I like to hear you laugh, Joe,' the girl said, as she peered into the basket. 'Oh, what lovely flowers!'

'I got those for you and—mother, and these for you, Jack,' he said, showing some of the contents of the basket to the lad.

'Apples!' cried Jack, laughing, as he reached out his arm and took some. 'We've got some in the garden—not such beauties as these, though.'

Joe carried in the basket, and as Ethel and the maidservant flitted about preparing breakfast, he 'lent a hand,' as he phrased it, every now and then.

'Why, you *are* handy, Joe!' Ethel said presently, as she stepped back to admire the flower-adorned table.

'Most bushmen are,' he replied gaily. 'But any fellow would be handy if he had to help a girl like you.'

'Why, Joe, that is a compliment! Jack never pays me compliments, do you, Jack?' she said, as the lad emerged from his room.

'Don't want to make you proud,' he laughed, stepping up to the bookcase.

'Now, Jack; not this morning. Breakfast is nearly ready, and you cannot read at table now Joe

has come home. He always does,' she said, turning to Joe despairingly, 'all day long, and at meals, too, and we cannot get a word out of him when once he begins to read those silly things.'

'Why, it's Homer!' expostulated Jack indignantly. 'Do you call that a silly book?'

'It's a disagreeable book,' she said, placing herself before the bookcase, and warding him off with her hands. 'Go away, you rude boy!'

Joe stood and watched their young happy faces, and smiled softly to himself as, more by intuition than actual hearing, he took in the situation.

And then Mrs. Pontifex came in, looking, as her daughter declared, ten years younger and happier than before Joe came home.

'Jack and I shall be jealous,' Ethel pouted in affected anger as the old lady held up her face for Joe's kiss. 'Look at the table, mother!'

'I think you must read in future, Joe,' Mrs. Pontifex said, after she had admired the arrangement of the table, and administered a loving lecture on the profuse purchases. 'Prayers, you know,' she said explanatorily, as she handed him the open book.

The small maid came in demurely and took her seat, and Joe, somewhat discomfited at the novelty of the situation, took the book from his mother's hand.

'*When the wicked man turneth away from the wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive.*'

'*I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*'

His deep musical voice sounded pleasantly in the cheerful sun-lighted room, and as he read, the beauty of the words laid hold on him, and his tones instinctively fell into the solemnity of his theme.

Mrs. Pontifex closed her eyes, and sent a heart-born prayer to Him who had spared her boy. . . . The brother and sister felt their hearts warm towards the reader as he read on. Only once in the *Venite* did the solemn voice falter, or lose its music—

'. . . *as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness.*'

As he read these words his voice broke, and he made a motion as though to put down the book, but with an effort he mastered himself and completed the reading.

'You read beautifully, Joe,' Mrs. Pontifex said admiringly—'almost as well as your dear father.'

CHAPTER IX.

FLIGHT.

As they sat at breakfast, Ethel questioned her brother as to his marketing experiences, and they all chided him when he confessed that in his dealings that morning, as in almost all small matters, he had simply put down half a sovereign for each purchase and taken the change without inquiring as to prices.

'You see,' he said, in explanation, 'it is no use my asking how much peaches or apples or cakes are; I never hear the answer, so I just plump down the half-sovereign and take the change. Very often people say, "Have you any smaller change, sir?" I can always tell by their lips when they say that, and I say, "Perhaps you can get it; I will wait," and then I get the silver changed back into gold, you know.'

'But what a lot of trouble to take! Why don't you tell them to speak up?' asked Jack wonderingly.

'I did at first, but it is so painful to see all the people near me turn round, and stare and smile and nudge one another. It seems silly, I dare say, but I prefer my way.'

'But, Joe, you must get cheated *dreadfully;* some people are *very* dishonest,' exclaimed Ethel, emphasizing the adverbs.

'I don't mind being cheated now and then; it's better than a scene.'

'You have a true Englishman's dread of a scene, Joe; your father was like that, too; he simply dreaded anything of the sort.'

'I saw a young lady on a black horse; she had a groom riding behind her. I think she came from that large house on the hill, and she beckoned to me,' Joe resumed.

'Why, that was "*Lady Mischief*"—Maud Hamilton, you know!' cried Jack.

'Lady Mischief?'

'Yes; you christened her that yourself. She is quite proud of it, though she pretends she does not like it. You two used to be great chums till you thrashed Frank; didn't they, mother?'

The old lady nodded assent.

'What did I thrash him for?' asked Joe, wondering how Ethel and Jack knew so much of what had happened when they were so very young.

'He tried to kiss Amy, and she *hit* him, and then

you came up, and you two boys fought down in the Rectory garden, and Amy stood by crying, and Frank's eyes were all bunged up, and his nose bleeding, and you got an awful thrashing from father,' recounted Jack, to whom the story was familiar.

'I hope he won't want to renew the fight now,' said Joe, wondering inwardly what he should hear of himself next.

'Why, Frank is in Australia. Didn't you ever meet him?'

'Frank Hamilton—Hamilton! Oh!' exclaimed Joe with a sudden start, and momentary loss of colour; 'I remember meeting him in Coolgardie.'

'You must tell Maud. Didn't you go to her when she beckoned to you?'

'Not I; I was afraid of its being someone whom I ought to remember and could not, so I climbed over the wall and ran,' he admitted.

'But, Joe, you cannot be always running away. Why should you fear to meet Maud? She has a wonderfully clear voice—anyone can hear her. I only wonder she did not put her horse to the wall and chase you; it would be just like her.'

'Besides, Joe,' added his mother, smiling, 'if Maud wants to see you, you may be sure she will do so; she always has her own way.'

'She will be down here directly Sir John has finished breakfast, and she will pitch into you

properly, Joe,' laughed Jack; 'I expect she will ride down directly after breakfast.'

'She will be too late to see me if she does; I am going up to London by the morning train. . . . Oh,' he resumed as they stared at him in wonderment, 'I thought it all out last night. I will go up and see about a house at once; I could not bear to live here just now among the people I ought to know and yet cannot remember. I am sure it will be best, and directly I have found nice lodgings I will telegraph to you to come up, and then when you have got all the clothes and things you want, and Jack's outfit is ready, we can begin house-hunting in earnest.'

'Why, Joe, I've hardly seen you yet,' Ethel pouted. 'Mother and Jack had you nearly all the time yesterday; it's too bad.'

She had risen from her chair and stooped over him as she spoke, rubbing her soft cheek against his face affectionately. It amused yet vexed her to see the ready colour flood his face at her little caress. 'How little he must have seen of girls,' she thought to herself, 'if he blushes when his own sister kisses him!'

Breakfast over, she ran off to assist the maid in such of the domestic tasks as she could before starting for school. Peeping in presently, she found Jack had disappeared, and her mother and Joe were standing by the little window talking.

She had been barely seven years old when Joe had run away, and personal recollections of him were slight and misty, most of her knowledge of him having been gained in later years, after her father's death, when she had come to be her mother's help and solace.

Even before the Rev. Joseph Pontifex died, there had been times when the mother, wearying for her eldest born, had eased her mind by recounting to her daughter the lad's wild pranks and escapades. As Ethel looked at him now, and noted his gentle ways, the patient droop of the fair head as he listened to his mother's words, she tried to conjure up in her imagination how he must have looked in the days before his affliction had fallen on him.

She pictured him wild and reckless in the strange land from whence he had come—saw in her mind's eye the stalwart, handsome fellow camping in the lonely Bush with his roving companions as they pursued their strange, fascinating pursuit for gold. And then her thoughts drifted to Amy Varrow, her bosom friend, with whom she had often talked of Joe and his doings. Poor Amy! who had once been a wild tomboy, almost as daring as Joe himself, and who had been the only one in Orminster to receive a letter from Joe after his departure. 'And now he has forgotten her very existence!' she murmured to herself in sympathy for her friend.

As she stood peeping in and dreaming, Jack came scurrying up the garden breathless and flushed; and at the noise he made the occupants of the sitting-room came out.

It was arranged that Jack should accompany Joe to the station, and as their ways lay for a little dsitance together, the girl and her brothers started off, Mrs. Pontifex watching with proud eyes as they walked away.

Ethel chattered in great spirits, leaning proudly on the tall brother so strangely returned and so quickly departing.

'What was the name of your mate, Joe?' she said presently—'the one who went with you to that strange place, the "Wings of Silence," where you found all the gold?'

His face, slightly drooped to catch her words, darkened as their meaning reached him.

'My mate? His name was Hay—Clem Hay.'

'What a pretty name! Did he not want to come to England too? Why did he stay behind?'

'He had to,' Joe said grimly; 'he is dead.'

There was something in his tone new to the girl, and with a quick, inquiring look into his face she dropped the subject, chattering on local matters till they reached the cross-roads. Here Ethel turned off to cross the mill-field, and the brothers continued their way to the railway-station.

As Ethel passed the Rectory, there came down the garden-path a girl, or woman, of about seven-and-twenty years of age, a small woman, with a thin face, remarkable for little but its startling pallor and the grave violet eyes which lit it up.

It was not easy to say in what Amy Varrow's charm consisted—a cameo face without a particle of colour, and so small that it almost seemed mean; and yet no one looking at her a second time could harbour a suspicion of meanness in connection with the pure little face. Dark silky hair brushed well back from the white brows accentuated her fragile appearance. And yet she was not weak; on the contrary, her small frame was strong and active, and, in spite of her demure looks, her speech was incisive and to the point. Her father called her, in fun, Miss Practical, and in spite of that early romance, which she still clung to, she was in most matters a very practical, sensible little woman.

She wore no hat, and her silky hair, a little disarranged by her quick run, fell over her small ears as she reached the gate. Ethel thought she had never seen her looking so pretty, and her heart contracted with a sharp pain as the clear voice cried:

'Jack has been here, Ethel! He says Joe has come home.'

'Yes, dear; he came last night, and has gone up to London again.'

It was impossible for the white face to grow whiter, but the dark eyes grew misty and troubled, and her lips trembled as she essayed to speak.

Ethel's kindly heart warmed to her in her trouble, and, forgetful of the school, she leaned upon the gate, and poured out all her news of Joe—his home-coming; his silly, romantic plan of going away silently after helping them; his deafness and loss of memory; his dread of strangers; his wealth, and his good looks.

'Jack only ran in and said, "Joe's come home—he's deaf!" and ran away again,' Amy said tremulously, as she listened to the budget of news. 'I can hardly understand it. Is he *much* changed?'

'Oh,' cried Ethel impulsively, 'he is splendid—so big and strong.'

'I know—I know,' the other said, half impatiently. 'He was always like that—tall, and straight, and fearless. But it is not *that* I meant, Eth. You say his memory is gone. Has he—has he forgotten *me?*' she cried, with a catch in her voice. 'Ethel—oh! Ethel, don't say he has!' she said, as her companion held her peace. 'He wrote to me—to me. It can't be true!'

'It is, dearie,' the younger girl said compassionately; 'but he remem——'

But Amy had turned away to hide her face, and before her friend could prevent her, was hurrying back

to the Rectory, and Ethel, remembering her school, had perforce to leave her to fight her battle alone.

But for Amy there was to be no hiding away this morning, for as she entered the porch she met her father.

'Was that Ethel Pontifex speaking to you?' he asked her eagerly.

'Yes, father.'

'Well, what is the news of Joe? Is he really at home again?'

She told him with averted face the news she had just heard.

'What! Gone up to London again already! Lost his hearing and his memory? That is bad. Didn't he know his own folks?'

'I suppose so, father. He went to them. Oh, yes, I think he knew them.'

'And you, child,' he said, putting his arm tenderly about her—'he has not forgotten you, eh?'

'Yes, father.'

'What! forgotten you, Amy!' he said incredulously. 'Why, he wrote to you not so very long ago.'

'It is so, father,' she said, lifting her eyes bravely to his.

Perhaps something he saw there upset the old clergyman, for he kissed her, and walked rapidly away with a frowning brow and troubled eyes.

Amy, left to herself, went slowly up to her own sanctum, and, opening her desk, took out a well-worn letter:

'COOLGARDIE, W.A.,
'*17th May.*

'DEAR AMY,

'I have never written before, because I have had no good news to send. I have been knocking about all over the Colonies, gold-digging, bullock-punching, boundary-riding, and all sorts. Now, however, I have a chance. I got here nearly penniless, and met an old fellow who hails from Orminster. His name is rather a curious one—Caffyn. Do you know anyone of that name in Orminster? But perhaps it is only an assumed name. Well, when he learned I was an Orminster man, he struck up a sort of friendship with me. For the last fifteen or sixteen years he has been a professional gold-digger, and has made and spent at least *one* fortune.

'A year ago he was prospecting between the boundaries of this colony and South Australia, and quite accidentally fell in with a wonderfully rich place, called by the natives "the place of the Wings of Silence." He was too short of provisions when he reached the place to make any stay, so he started back for the settled districts to get a good outfit and secure claims, though the latter was hardly necessary, since the place is almost inaccessible.

Still, having had a claim "jumped" once, he determined to do everything in a legal manner. He had got a touch of fever when he came down, and in place of starting for "the Wings of Silence," as he calls it, he has been staying on here, and so I met him. Partly because I am an Orminster man, and partly because I am young and strong, he has asked me to be his "mate" on equal shares. Of course, I have accepted, but you must not think it a one-sided bargain; the old fellow has to provide the provisions and dray, and owns the claim, so far as anyone can be said to own it; but he could not go by himself, and my youth and strength are fair equivalents for what he brings.

'The long and short of it is that I am off with him to the lease as soon as he is ready to start.

'I had a funny adventure with Frank Hamilton the other day. Did you know he was out here? "Captain Francis Hamilton, the only son and heir of Sir John Hamilton of Orminster Chace," was the way they referred to him in the paper. I can't tell you all about it now, but he took another fellow for me, and the other fellow snubbed him. When he really met me he was awfully ceremonious till the matter was explained. But I can't write any more now; old Caffyn has called for me.

'I have never written home, not even to my mother, and I know nothing of home news. At

first I was too angry to write, then too wicked and reckless, for I have been a bad lot altogether, Amy, my girl—not fit for a little white violet like you. I would ask all sorts of questions, but it is useless, since you could not write to me. The "Wings of Silence" are entirely beyond civilization; even explorers have only skirted round the desert in which they stand.

'Kiss my mother and little Eth for me. Tell my father I will come home in two years at latest. Give your dear old dad my love, and tell him that when I do come home I will marry you with or without his consent, for I *will* marry you, Amy. With all my sins out here (and they have not been few) I have never thought of any girl but my white English violet. Good-bye.

'Your loving

'JOE.'

CHAPTER X.

'MY LADY MISCHIEF.'

MRS. PONTIFEX had not been long left alone after her children's departure when Maud Hamilton rode up to the cottage gate, and, tossing the reins to her groom, ran up the garden path, and burst tumultuously into the little sitting-room.

She was a medium-sized girl, with a rather large mouth, strong white teeth, impertinent nose, flashing gray eyes, and a general breeziness of manner which was voted 'jolly' by her friends and 'boisterous' by her few enemies. She had a hearty, pleasant manner, and looked what she was—a frank, fearless, large-hearted girl, quick-tempered, but generous, impatient of formality, and a sincere hater of anything mean or underhand. Unfortunately, she had never known a mother's care, and had contracted the habit of interlarding her speech with slang to such a degree as to effectually prevent her really

noble character from discovery by anyone but her own small circle of friends. Even her father did not suspect the many good qualities hidden under the girl's off-hand manner, and though he made no sustained effort to eradicate the silly habit which had become a second nature to the girl, he frequently bewailed her want of good manners when communing with himself.

On one occasion, when she was about eighteen, a distant relative of Sir John's, a lady well on in the thirties, and a pattern of propriety, spent a few days at Orminster Chace, and Sir John, having no one else, had to resign the lady to his daughter's care. At first Maud behaved as well as the most severe critic could have desired, but on the second day the inanities and primness of her guest became too much for her, and she repaid herself for the enforced restraint by such a burst of activity that the poor lady drew herself up, and took refuge in astonished silence. It was at dinner on the second day, however, that Maud irrevocably lost her favour. Sir John, his guest, Maud, and Francis were the only persons at the table, but in accordance with his custom Sir John dined in the large dining-room and in state.

Egged on by Francis, Maud grew more and more slangy, till at last she convulsed her brother by asking, in an affable manner:

'Will you not take another spud, dear? They are beautiful spuds; the old man grew them himself.'

Considering that 'the old man' was no other than Sir John Hamilton himself, who sat at the head of the table glowering at his daughter, and that William, in doubt whether he ought to remain with the proffered potatoes projected towards the visitor, or depart while he still had control over his risibility, was still hovering about the lady's chair, it is not to be wondered at that Sir John was furiously angry and his visitor shocked beyond description.

In Orminster the stories of Maud Hamilton's generosities, peculiarities, and escapades almost equalled those of Joe Pontifex. The men or women who had been guilty of any mean or petty acts feared discovery by 'Miss Maud' infinitely more than by the Baronet. She was an absolutely fearless rider, and in this direction alone was a standing topic of conversation with the villagers. Her love affairs were many, the latest victim having been Fred Ellerby, the Rev. Ambrose Varrow's curate; but as Fred confided to a confidante:

'How could a fellow propose a second time to a girl who simply laughed and said: "Go back to your mammy, Fred, and don't be cheeky"?'

It was very evident to Mrs. Pontifex that Maud was in one of her wayward moods this morning, for

on learning that Joe had actually returned to London, she roundly abused him.

'Why did he not stop when I called him?' she said, slashing her habit with her whip; 'I had two minds to put Madcap at the wall and ride him down. I wish I had now.—Oh,' she said, as Mrs. Pontifex explained his deafness and loss of memory, 'don't you believe it, my dear; he was just *frightened!*'

The old lady smiled confidently.

'I wish you had heard him telling us last night; it was terribly sad;' and she recounted Joe's story, with little flights now and then as to his personal appearance.

'He must be a ninny!' said Maud contemptuously. 'If he is deaf, why can't he get up and say so? I guess I would soon make him hear . . . and as for losing his memory, I don't believe a word of it, so there! Why, I had a letter from Frank (some time ago, certainly), and he said he had met Joe in Coolgardie, and he was as wild as ever—been having a "jamboree," whatever that is, before leaving for the goldfields.'

'But he got ill coming back from the goldfields, Maud,' said the old lady austerely.

'Then if he did, and forgot all the past, how did he know all about his travels and gold-digging adventures that he told you about?' cried her unabashed visitor.

The old lady looked nonplussed.

'I never thought of that; but I am sure he could explain it,' she said loyally.

'Oh, of course—so can I. He is rich now; Amy is not, and she is not so young as she was. He wants to throw her over.'

'Maud! you are speaking of my son!'

The girl had her arms about her in a minute, and kissed her vehemently.

'It was a horrid thing to say—I am a beast!' she said contritely. 'I think I'll go now. Good-bye.'

She was off like a flash and mounted on Madcap long before Mrs. Pontifex had recovered her breath from the parting hug; but, as Madcap pranced along the lane, Maud was inwardly endorsing her own previous speech.

'I believe that *is* it,' she said to herself; 'he may be deaf, but I don't believe in his loss of memory . . . and as for the gentleness and beautiful voice—pooh! Joe was about as gentle as a grizzly bear, and had a voice like a bull-frog!'

On leaving the Cottage, Maud rode to the Rectory; but if Mrs. Pontifex had simply listened to Maud's sweeping condemnation in mild disbelief, Amy took quite a different attitude, and for once Maud found her friend not only indignant, but downright angry.

'Why, you little spitfire!' she cried, when Amy had exhausted herself by her torrent of upbraiding

words. 'You little spitfire! I've a good mind to *shake* you! What do you mean by such rubbish? For it is rubbish to tell me I am unjust and unsympathetic . . . and as for repeating all that nonsense of Ethel's about his gentleness, it's *rot*—yes, *rot!* . . . Joe never was gentle and never will be, and as for business in London, it is simply preposterous—so there!'

'You have no right to say such things, Maud; he was as tender-hearted——'

'Oh, rubbish! Do you remember when this tender-hearted young gentleman almost killed Frank?—had to be *dragged* away from him by main force?'

'Your brother deserved it,' said Amy coldly.

'All because he wanted to kiss you! . . . Well, I suppose it is no good talking; I shall only vex you, so good-bye. Come, give me a kiss, Amy, and don't be silly. Give my love to the old gentleman—the Reverend, you know—not *the* old gentleman, against whose wiles he warned us so eloquently last Sunday. By-bye, spitfire!'

There was no one else Maud could think of for the moment with whom she could exchange ideas on the subject which now occupied her mind, except her father; and, accordingly, she rode home, and finding Sir John pottering about the garden, took possession of him, and regaled him with the news of Joe Pontifex's arrival and departure.

'It's all nonsense, you know, dad, for them to say he has forgotten things,' she said, after she had put the facts before him.

'I am not so sure of that,' Sir John said slowly; 'I fancy such occurrences are not unusual. . . . In any case, I can quite understand a sensitive man declining to submit himself to the pain of living amongst folks who know the greater part of his history, and have once been his friends, and yet whom he cannot himself recollect.'

'But, my dear man, did you ever know Joe Pontifex to be sensitive?'

'I do wish, Maud, that you would not adopt that tone to me,' said her father testily. . . . 'It is unladylike and rude, and you know it annoys me. As for young Pontifex, I know very little about him. I liked and respected his father, and have a sincere regard for Mrs. Pontifex and Ethel; but as for young Joseph, if all the stories I have heard are true, he was a perfect young fiend for mischief as a boy. I know he half killed Francis some time before he ran away about some trumpery——'

'You're wrong there, old man! It wasn't anything trumpery; you admire her yourself, you wicked old thing!'

'Her? Who?' demanded her father irritably.

'Amy Varrow. She is not trumpery, is she?'

'She is a little lady, a sweet, sensible woman; but

what on earth has she to do with Francis and young Pontifex?'

'Oh, Frank was always fond of girls, you know; and he tried to kiss Amy, and Joe came up and gave him a larruping.'

'A larruping! For Heaven's sake, Maud, do try and stop that terrible habit of yours! Where you learn these phrases is beyond my comprehension.'

'Well, he beat him then—punched his head.'

'It served him right. But what had Pontifex to do with her?'

'Why, my dear, they were engaged.'

'Stuff and nonsense! A boy and girl like that! Why, her father sent her to a boarding-school, now I come to think of it. How can you talk such utter nonsense, Maud?'

'Stuff and nonsense! My dear father, how can you talk such nonsense? Where do *you* learn these phrases——'

'I suppose he has got his wool off properly this time,' soliloquized Maud, watching her father as he walked angrily away. 'Poor, dear old man! I'm afraid I am an awful trial to him.'

She wandered about restlessly for some time; and then suddenly remembering her brother's letter of which she had told Mrs. Pontifex, she went to her own room and began a hunt for it.

'I wonder where on earth I put it,' she said

irresolutely, pulling out one drawer after another. 'Those are dance programmes . . . and these are bills. I know I put it somewhere. . . .' Rather appalled at the heterogeneous masses in the drawers, she was about to shut them when she caught sight of a small diary. 'Oh, that's where it is, I do believe;' and, fishing it out, she held the back and front together and waved the book in the air, sending down a small shower of valentines, notes, and odds and ends.

The letter she searched for was conspicuous by being written on large, square foreign note-paper; and hastily cramming the other things into the drawers, she sat down, still in her riding habit, to read it.

'You will be surprised to hear that, after searching in vain for Joe Pontifex for over a year, I at last met him quite accidentally at the goldfields at Coolgardie. He was looking very well, and has grown into an exceedingly fine fellow. I went up, quite glad to meet an Orminster man, and proffered my hand. To my surprise he not only made no offer to take it, but stared at me so coolly that I thought I must be mistaken, and walked off feeling rather small. But at the hotel, a few nights later, I noticed a man staring at me persistently, and recognised Joe. He actually had the cheek to nod

to me, and later on he came up and positively *made* me shake hands. I was rather stiff with him, but he was, as they say here, "a bit sprung," *i.e.*, rather tipsy, and took my coolness so badly that, in order to avoid a downright disturbance, I had to dissemble. I told him of my having met him before and his affected surprise, but he only laughed, and asked me what my poison was, *i.e.*, what I would have to drink. I had to drink with him to avoid a row, and was heartily glad to get rid of him. He confided to me while I was with him that he was waiting for his mate to recover from an illness, and was then going to some far-distant place (discovered by the said mate), where they anticipated finding gold in such quantities that they both expected to be millionaires, and he was having what he called "a jamboree," *i.e.*, drunken bout, previous to beginning the long and arduous journey. I used to like Joe, in spite of the awful licking he gave me, but I cannot say I'm anxious to meet him again. He is terribly altered as far as manners go, his conversation is rough, and his strong language is extra strong, even for the colonies, where I verily believe two-thirds of the men use swear-words in every other sentence.

'Of course, I do not want you to mention this. Perhaps he met me at the time when he was at his worst. The drink may have had something to do

with it . . . but it seems a great pity that so fine a looking fellow should be so rough and boisterous. His father was a thorough gentleman. . . .'

'That's all about Joe,' soliloquized Maud. 'It hardly fits in with Mrs. Pontifex's goody-goody young man. I wish I had seen him, though. There are not so many remarkably handsome men in Orminster that I can afford to miss one when he does appear, more especially when he happens to be Amy's fiancé.'

Perhaps Maud would have been more than ever anxious to meet him had she known that he was at that moment engrossed in thoughts about herself and her family. As he was whirled along in the railway carriage, Joe Pontifex was cordially cursing the weakness which had led him to Orminster at all.

'I might far better have carried out my first intention,' he muttered, 'and saved them all the pain and trouble, and myself all this worry; for unless I can get them away from Orminster, there will be nothing but misery with the people whom I ought to know; and if that confounded young Hamilton should take it into his head to come to England and should meet me——'

He did not finish his train of thought, but a shrug of his shoulders denoted that the result of such a meeting would probably be the reverse of pleasant.

CHAPTER XI.

A NEW HOME.

JOSEPH PONTIFEX lost very little time after reaching London in searching for a temporary residence for his family, and on the second day of his arrival secured a lease of a handsomely-furnished house at Eltham, which, while it was well out of the whirl of London, was within easy reach for business purposes. By the aid of a long purse and plenty of energy he also obtained the necessary domestics, whom he promptly installed in the house; and having wired to his mother that all was in readiness for her arrival, and supplemented the wire with a telegraphic order for a sufficient sum of money to enable them to make their journey in comfort, and settle any accounts they might have in the village, he took up his residence on the fourth day of his arrival in the City in the Eltham house.

'He must have paid a lot of money for that

telegram,' said Ethel, looking at the lengthy message, and wondering in her thrifty mind why he had not written.

'And he has not said where the house is!' exclaimed Jack. 'Why, what a curious fellow he is!'

There was no trouble in leaving the Cottage, for Joe's order was for such a large amount as to pay all their small debts, as well as a quarter's rent in advance for the Cottage, and leave a substantial sum over. And so, just a week after the wanderer's return to Orminster, the little family left it for ever to journey Londonwards.

It was seldom that Orminster station was so crowded as on the day the Pontifexes left their native place. Sir John Hamilton and his daughter; the Rector and Amy Varrow; Dr. Sackville, his wife and family; Fred Ellerby; Mr. and Mrs. Leighton; old Squire Clerton and his boys and girls; all Ethel's fellow-teachers, and a large number of her erstwhile pupils, had assembled to bid them good-bye. Mrs. Pontifex, proud and happy, and only wishing that the crowd of kind friends could have seen 'her boy' with her, was almost overcome by the attentions and good wishes showered upon her, and Ethel fairly cried as she bade Amy and Maud good-bye. Only Jack appeared undisturbed by the bustle and excitement, and settled down to his book almost before the train had cleared the platform.

At the terminus Joe met them, and whisked them off in a cab to Cannon Street Station. During the time occupied in reaching Eltham Station he recounted his doings, and described the house he had taken. Almost before they knew where they were, he had handed them out again at Eltham, and they found themselves bowling along in a carriage drawn by a fast pair of horses.

Neither his mother nor sister had been prepared by Joe's description for the beautiful little house into which he welcomed them, and he had seldom felt so happy as when escorting them over their new domain.

At breakfast next morning the first rift appeared. Ethel had announced her intention of spending the morning in writing letters.

'I *must* tell Amy and Maud that we arrived safely, and what a lovely little home you have got for us, Joe,' she said, with a bright smile.

'I would rather you did not write,' he said bluntly.

'Why?'

He looked round at them all in a hesitating manner for a moment or two, and then, taking courage, said:

'I don't want any Orminster people to know where we are just yet—not till we get a house of our own and are comfortably settled.'

He saw their inquiring looks, and went on, less confidently:

'To you, who do not understand what my deafness and loss of memory is to me, it would be impossible to describe the misery I should endure if any Orminster people were about me just now. I want to be quite settled, to learn to know you all better, to let you learn to know me, and comprehend the absolute helplessness of one in my position.'

They looked at him in silent surprise, and he continued:

'I want—God knows how much—to be kind to you all, to be really a son to my mother, and a brother to you two, but I feel that it is absolutely necessary that we should be all by ourselves for awhile. If once these people ascertain our address, they will be sure to come sooner or later.'

'Are we to be in hiding, then?' asked Ethel gravely.

'Oh, no; not that, but just for a little while to be entirely by ourselves; that is all I want.'

'We will say no more about it, Joe; you are the master,' said Mrs. Pontifex quietly. 'Ethel will not write.'

She had already contemplated asking Mrs. Sackville to come up and give her the benefit of her advice as regarded shopping, and had, indeed, vaguely thought of having Amy to stay with them, but she put her own wishes aside directly Joe had spoken of his infirmities.

'Very well, Joe,' acquiesced Ethel; 'it shall be as you say.'

Jack, who was not consulted, had his own ideas on the subject, but forebore to express them, and shortly afterwards Joe ushered them into a small room which he had fitted up as a writing-room, and displayed whole sheaves of replies to advertisements and a great bundle of agents' lists of eligible properties for sale. He had already sorted them out into some order, and they spent the morning pleasantly enough in discussing the various properties and the order in which they would inspect them.

Mrs. Pontifex was all for handing over the selection to Joe entirely, for on one point he was firm: nothing would induce him to settle in Devonshire or Somersetshire. But backed up by Ethel and Jack he succeeded in convincing her that her opinion was absolutely necessary in order to make them all happy, and the old lady, after a little opposition, entered heartily enough into the details.

Perhaps there was nothing better calculated to bring the little family closer together than this looking over lists and letters, and yet Ethel noticed with a little sigh that the caresses she gave Joe as they pored over the papers together caused him uneasiness, and it hurt her to see how unresponsive he was to the love she offered him. To his mother Joe was different; he caressed and tended her with a devoted-

ness that was touching, and made his avoidance of his sister the harder to bear. She was a sensitive, high-spirited girl, and presently the pain gave way to indignation at the undeserved coldness, for she was not conscious of having given him any offence. And yet she could not but observe that when she refrained from caressing him and left off her endearing ways, he looked pained and unhappy.

'He is unreasonable,' she said to herself impatiently. 'When I proffer my love he seems not to want it, and when I am cold he seems to feel hurt.'

What with the shopping necessary to replenish their meagre wardrobes, and the excursions to view the properties advertised for sale, the days passed quickly by; but the relations between Joe and Ethel grew more strained with every day, until even Mrs. Pontifex noticed it, and questioned her daughter.

'I can't help it, mother,' the girl said, bursting into tears. 'I am so proud and fond of Joe, and he seems to shun me. What have I done to be treated like that? He never kisses me of his own accord, but treats me as if I was some grand lady and he my servant.'

Joe's confession was more reserved.

'I love her dearly—more than I can say—but I cannot bring myself to kiss her and treat her familiarly. I would give my life for her if it would make her happy—willingly.'

But the explanations brought about no better

result until one morning, when Mrs. Pontifex was busy reading an Orminster paper which Joe had procured for her. On this particular morning Jack had gone off to London sight-seeing, and Joe was sitting in his own snuggery, into which he often retired to smoke, and from which, as Ethel opened the door, there came the sharp clicks of an instrument which had drowned the sound of her knocking, though she had knocked as loudly as she could.

'Joe,' she said, approaching him, 'how long are we to go on like this, dear?'

He sprang up as she drew near, and she noticed that the instrument at which he was engaged was a type-writer. He bent his head to catch what she said, and as she repeated it he hesitated.

'Don't you love me, Joe?' she asked plaintively.

For all answer he flung out one long arm, and drew her close to him, and kissed her time after time passionately on the lips, eyes, cheeks, and brows, until, rather frightened at the hungry, passionate embrace, she disengaged herself with a faint laugh, and with crimson cheeks stood looking at him, her fair hair rumpled and tumbled, and her breath coming in little gasps.

'Joe! Why did you kiss me like that?' she said, panting.

He was white now, or as white as his sunburnt skin would allow, and his eyes shone bright and fierce.

'It's the only way I can kiss you,' he said shortly.

'But why don't you kiss me like other girls' brothers?' she asked shyly.

'I don't know anything about other girls' brothers,' he said curtly. 'I don't know much about girls at all.'

The girl's humour changed, as a girl's humour so often does, and she made him a mock little curtsey.

'Shall I show you how to kiss me, Joe?'

He nodded, without speaking.

With an exaggerated mimicry of a man's stride she walked to him, and, putting her arms upon his shoulder, forced him to sit down again on his chair, and then, with a grotesque little affectation of moving a moustache from her lips, bent over him and kissed him lightly on either cheek. 'Good-morning, Ethel dear,' she said, in as gruff a voice as she could assume.

He was looking at her passionately again now, and the two strong hands which gripped the chair on either side showed great white strips where the knuckles almost burst the skin. With all her pretty playfulness dispelled as by a blow, she stood and stared at him in terror, and for a moment a fear flashed through her mind that he was mad, that the troubles he had passed through had unhinged his mind.

Presently the intensity of his look lessened, and he rose slowly from his chair.

'Forgive me, dear,' he said humbly, and then he

drew her softly to him and kissed her gently and tenderly on either cheek. 'Good-morning, Ethel dear,' he whispered, and let her go, and she, like a frightened fawn, fled to her own room to cry a little, to laugh a trifle hysterically, and finally to return to his den and ask the ogre if she might help him with his type-writing, an offer he firmly but gently refused.

While they were still talking good-naturedly of this, Ethel heard Mrs. Pontifex calling her, and they both went to the morning-room, to find her, spectacles on nose and quivering with excitement, holding the Orminster paper and the *Times* out for them to read.

'The strangest thing!' she cried, as she pointed to the two papers.

Joe took one of them, the *Orminster News*, and read a short telegram, headed, '*Death of two English gentlemen, Messrs. John and George Pontifex, killed by a carriage accident in Paris.*'

The other paper—the *Times*—contained a legal notice:

> '*PONTIFEX.—If Joseph Pontifex, son of the late Rev. Joseph Pontifex (sometime Rector of Orminster, Somerset, but now deceased, and nephew of the late George Pontifex, of Ilverill, Scotland, and John Pontifex, of The Abbey, Westmore, Surrey), will call upon Messrs. Cowell and Linstock, at the undermentioned address, he will hear of something to his advantage, and any person giving reliable notice of the whereabouts of the said Joseph Pontifex will be rewarded.*'

'And so your uncles are both dead, dears!' the old lady said, lifting her hands, 'and we have only just noticed it. The Orminster paper is four days old too! That comes of being so engrossed with our advertisements and things. You will probably inherit both their fortunes, Joe,' she added presently—'at least, I suppose so, in the light of this advertisement.'

'I don't want their money,' he said gruffly, 'Ive enough of my own. I won't touch it.'

'But, my dear, if it is left to you?'

'I don't care—Jack can have it—or Ethel—or you, but I won't touch a penny of it—wild horses would not make me.'

'Well, perhaps you will not be asked,' said Ethel, laughing. 'You may only be an executor, or trustee, or something.'

But Joe did not seem comforted, and went off with a ruffled brow—a curious spectacle of a probably extremely wealthy legatee honestly wishing the money had been left to anyone but himself.

He knew it would be almost impossible to prevent the lawyers finding out his whereabouts if they wished to. His mother had lived in Orminster nearly all her life, and had left, as was well known in Orminster, to go to London with the son so lately returned from Australia. The house-agents, and others to whom he had applied, all knew him as

Joseph Pontifex, and the more he reflected the more worried he grew.

'Devil take the pair of them!' he muttered angrily as he sat down to his type-writing again. 'What the deuce did they want to die for!'

But as day after day passed by without his being molested, he began to hope that the affair was not of sufficient importance for the lawyers to trouble themselves to discover him; that he might only be a legatee for some trifling amount, after all; and he began again to enter into the excursions into the country to view the different properties advertised for sale with greater zest than ever.

He was beginning to understand his sister better, to laugh at her quaint remarks, and the pretty careless gaiety to which she sometimes abandoned herself. It pleased him to sit in the pleasant drawing-room sometimes of an evening, and watch the tall, slim girl as she indulged her whimsical fancies, to see her suddenly pounce upon her mother in mock indignation, lecturing her sharply on her old-fashioned method of doing her hair, the while her dexterous hands built up the beautiful soft white pile in the latest fashion . . . as likely as not extinguish the result by placing one of Joe's smoking-caps rakishly upon the old lady's head, and then, standing back to review her handiwork, go into ecstasies over the result.

'You old dear!' she would exclaim lovingly, as her mother patiently resigned herself to her daughter's humour; 'you are prettier than any girl I know.'

And then, suddenly going upon another tack, she would give her a mock lecture upon being vain, and then, changing her note again, pounce upon her and kiss and hug her, and vow she was the dearest dear.

And she would perhaps be talking of some old-time legend of Orminster, and suddenly flit away to her room, and come down with powdered hair and mincing step, and curtsey, and show a tiny ankle, and flirt her fan in a most bewitching manner, or sit down suddenly at the piano, and sing in a sweet, though untrained, voice some old-time ballad, and sing it so pathetically that often her own eyes were wet as well as her listeners'. But then, again, or e'er they had well attuned themselves to her pensive humour, she would suddenly burst out with the cheekiest, most coquettish of love songs, giving little nods and smiles and pensive sighs to her big silent brother as he sat by the piano listening. And just as suddenly as the humour seized her, it would pass away, and in her ordinary voice she would say sedately:

'Now, mother, you two have had enough nonsense for one night; let us be serious.'

Joe could seldom hear all she said, but he generally managed to catch the drift of her conversation, and would sit quietly observant, enjoying her light-hearted foolery as long as it lasted. It was a revelation to him to watch the girl, to note her dainty ways, to observe how, with all her nonsense and fun, she was never really disrespectful to her mother, and it made him happy to think that now that she was free of school and other worries the girl would have ample time to enjoy her life as it seemed to him so fresh and sweet a girl should enjoy it.

Every day they made excursions to some estate, in accordance with a list which they had made of the apparently most eligible, and at last agreed to purchase Knottoak, a large property near Tunbridge Wells. The estate was larger than even Joe had purposed buying, but Mrs. Pontifex and Ethel had shown such unmistakable admiration for the substantial old-fashioned building that he could not resist the pleasure of buying it for them. It was full of all sorts of surprises: here and there great buttresses covered with ivy-made natural bowers. On one side a massive flight of steps led up to a raised terrace upon which the great hall-door opened. The windows overlooking the terrace were long and narrow, of stained glass, giving the place an ecclesiastical appearance from the front. Above the hall, and projecting its long shadow athwart the terrace

when the sun had passed the meridian, was built a great square tower, loopholed, which overlooked a goodly expanse of country belonging to the estate.

They had wandered about admiring the picturesque old place for over an hour, and as Joe and his brother escorted Mrs. Pontifex once more into the large hall for a final survey, Ethel, who had darted away just previously, came stepping daintily from a side-door along the tiled floor, of which the coloured window cast bright gleams of changing light. She was in one of her whimsical humours, holding her skirts lightly gathered in her hands, and walking with an exaggerated haughtiness.

'Welcome to Knottoak Tower, faire ladye and faire sirs,' she said, with a profound curtsey.

Following Jack's look as his laugh rang out and echoed through the bare hall, Ethel turned and saw the caretaker watching her with an amused grin from the shadow of the great staircase. He had gone off for some more keys, and returned quicker than she had expected.

With flushed cheeks she dropped her skirts, and took refuge with her mother, hardly speaking till they were speeding homewards again, and even then, when Jack rallied her, she did not respond to his humour, for she was a shy girl, and her innocent nonsense had been reserved for her mother and Jack alone until Joe had come, and even now she would

sometimes suddenly abandon her light mood if she caught the elder brother's eye upon her.

In council that evening they decided that they could not possibly get a house they would like better —if Joe could really afford it.

Joe promptly settled the matter in a few words.

'It is a good deal of money, but the place is worth it. I will close the bargain to-morrow—at less than they ask if possible; if not, at their own terms.'

'*Mrs. Pontifex of Knottoak!*' cried Ethel, with a return of her high spirits, making an elaborate obeisance to her mother; and then, sidling up to her brother, she put her hands upon his shoulders, and said: 'Joe, you're a splendid brother!'

She lifted her pretty pouting lips upwards, and Joe could see the gleam of her white even teeth as her mouth curved in a happy smile.

'Am I?' he said awkwardly. 'I am glad you are pleased.'

The girl had been a very incarnation of brightness and innocent mirth a moment before, but as his stiff words were spoken the light faded from her face, her lips quivered, and before she could gain the door the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

'Well, you are a funny brother!' ejaculated Jack indignantly. 'Why didn't you kiss her? She *did* look pretty!'

Joe made no answer, and the boy went after his sister to comfort her, but not till his curious eyes had noted that Joe's face had grown very hard and stern, and the bearded mouth was shut so tightly that two great lines had graven themselves upon his cheeks.

'I could not help it!' he said to his mother, as he approached her, and answering rather his own reproaches than her sad looks.

For once his mother spoke sharply.

'Joe, Ethel is a good, sweet girl, a dear, loving daughter, and a kind, affectionate sister. Why do you treat her so? Do you not understand how sensitive she is? Poor girl! she will nearly break her tender heart at your coldness. And she is your own sister, Joe. What can you see in her to make you so cruel?'

'I don't mean to be cold—indeed—indeed, I do not,' he said miserably.

'Then why are you? Don't you know,' the old lady went on more sharply, 'that she will get afraid to be herself amongst us, and ashamed to indulge her harmless, pretty nonsense, which has so often whiled away our dreary evenings in the cottage. She will think you despise her ways, and grow stiff and cold, instead of being my own sweet, natural girl.'

He rose, and kissing her silently, went out of the room and shut himself into his own den. As he sat

there, smoking savagely, his thoughts reverted to the first day he had seen his sister—her bright, loving welcome, her proffered kisses, the little way she had of stooping over his chair, and, like a kitten, rubbing her soft cheek against his own rough sunburnt face. He pictured her as he had known her since, always cheerful, forgiving, and affectionate; and then, as he recalled how he had seen her last—wounded, wet-eyed, ashamed of her own rejected affection—he brought one strong brown hand down heavily upon the little writing-table, and shattered it to pieces, cursing himself for a brute beast and a fool.

Half furtively he went along the passage to her room, and knocked. She opened the door after a short hesitation, and stood before him, her bosom heaving, her eyes sad and swollen.

'Will you forgive me, Ethel?' he said humbly. 'I was a brute.'

She was deeply wounded, and in her mind came thronging up the many evidences he had given of disliking her, and though her voice trembled, she spoke out bravely:

'I cannot *make* you love me, Joe. I forgive you, but I can see you dislike me sometimes. . . . I . . . I think I should like to go away—to go back to my school, please.'

He had his strong arm about her waist, her head upon his shoulder, and was kissing and soothing her,

and murmuring his penitence almost before she had finished speaking.

'But, Joe,' she said presently, half smiling, half in tears, 'you love me now, but to-morrow you may be hard again. What have I done?'

His arms tightened about her in such a clasp that she could scarcely breathe.

'It is not what you have done, my darling,' he said hoarsely, 'it is what *I* have done.'

She looked up at him in wonderment, but he said no more, and presently his vice-like embrace relaxed, and he kissed her gently, and smoothed her ruffled hair.

'Say you forgive me again, Eth.'

'I do, dear'—heartily.

She was, as he said in fun, a rainbow girl, for very soon the tears were all gone, and with shining eyes and flushed cheeks she led him to her mother.

'We've made it up, mammy, like good children,' she said, putting her face down to her mother to be kissed. 'Kiss her, Joe.'

Joe did her bidding, but could not fail to notice how unresponsive the old lady was for once, and it chilled him.

'I cannot stand it,' he muttered to himself, as he went back to his own den; 'it's killing me!'

CHAPTER XII.

'MY LADY MISCHIEF' AGAIN.

'Do you mean to say, Amy,' demanded Maud Hamilton, as she stood on the Vicarage steps, 'that you have not had a line from Ethel since she left?'

'No; I have not heard from her, or any of them,' Amy answered, with a slight flush.

'Well, if I don't call that mean of Eth! I didn't think she was such a little toad! But Mr. Joe's at the bottom of it, I'm sure; he wants to drop Orminster. I wonder what he has done that he is so dreadfully frightened of being found out.'

'Done?'

'Yes; he must have done something in Australia, or elsewhere, or else why does he——'

'I would rather not discuss it, Maud,' said Amy quietly, looking her imperious friend full in the face.

'Gracious goodness, you little spitfire! Don't

snap my nose off. I am only saying what everyone else is saying.'

'I do not see what business it can be of anyone's,' her friend said a little drearily; 'if he chooses to go to London and enjoy himself, and give his relations a little pleasure, I should think he had a perfect right to do so.'

'What nonsense! Who says he has not? But why does he do it so secretly? Why should he hurry off the morning after his arrival, and not let a soul see him? Why, the great bear!' Maud said, with a sudden angry flush, 'I beckoned to him to come to me when I was out for a morning ride, and he ran away! And then, why did he telegraph from London instead of writing? Why did he never mention the situation of the house he has taken? And why hasn't Eth written to anyone? Answer that.'

'I cannot, Maud—you know I cannot; but I am sure there is some good reason. You do not understand Joe; you never did. No one did.'

'Except you, I suppose, you conceited little muff.'

'Besides,' Amy went on, disregarding the interjection, 'you forget that the recent death of his uncles must have given him much to do.'

'Oh, fiddlesticks! he wasn't so fond of them, or they of him, that he would put himself out much over that, and Joe is not a particularly sensitive person.'

'You need not malign him, Maud. He has had a great deal of trouble.'

'Malign my grandmother! I've no patience with you, Amy; I understood Joe as well as anyone. Of course, *I* never agreed to elope with him.'

'*Maud!*'

'I beg your pardon, Amy; I am a thoughtless idiot, but you do make me wild. You know perfectly well he has behaved shamefully, and yet you pretend everything is quite natural. . . . I did not mean to vex you, dear.'

'I am not vexed, Maud.'

'Fudge! you are. You are just as cross as two sticks, or you would not speak like that. Oh, you can stare in that inquiring way and raise your nasty little eyebrows as much as you like, but you *are* disagreeable.'

'I did not mean to be, Maud, but I cannot listen to such talk. It pains me.'

'Oh, well, I've said my say. Oh, by the way, I haven't, though. What do you think? The governor is going to take me to London to-morrow for a week or ten days. I had such a time before I could make him promise.'

'I hope you will enjoy yourself,' said Amy coldly.

'You little crosspatch! Won't you kiss me, you prim little icicle!'

Amy gave her a cool little salute, and the friends

parted, the one to go about her household duties, and strive with all her loyal heart to hush the suspicions which Maud's words could not fail to kindle, the other to set about preparing for her journey to the metropolis.

'How long will your business take you, dad?' Maud asked next day as they travelled to London.

'I cannot say for certain. It is not my own business that is taking me this time; it is young Randell's. You know, I am one of his trustees, and we have an offer for his estate. I suppose it is a good offer, or Roberts would hardly have wired me to come up.'

'You don't mean Knottoak — that pretty old-fashioned place?'

'Yes. Young Randell has fooled away so much of his money that we must use the power given us by his father's will and sell the place. The young fellow could not possibly keep it up; he has utterly ruined himself to all intents and purposes, and talks of emigrating to one of the colonies with what he can save from the wreck after paying all his debts.'

'What a stupid fellow!'

'Stupid! Stupid is a mild word for such conduct.'

Maud and her father were to stay with Sir John's married sister—Mrs. Roxbergh, a very rich and fashionable widow, at whose house Maud had spent some very pleasant days, and the girl had already made up her mind to persuade her aunt to talk

Sir John over into making a prolonged stay, or, at least, to allow her to do so.

As usual they found Mrs. Roxbergh plunged in pleasures of all sorts, and though Sir John disapproved of his sister's gaiety and unrestfulness, Maud enjoyed herself immensely, and found her stay in London growing towards a close before she thought of making any inquiries for the Pontifexes, though she had fully intended searching for them when she started.

The information came to her quite unexpectedly one evening at a very grand and pompous dinner-party. Maud was sitting at no great distance from her father, and was feeling inexpressibly bored by her attendant cavalier, a noted scientist, when she suddenly heard the name 'Pontifex,' and her father, as if replying to a question, said:

'Oh yes, he is in England. I can vouch for that. In point of fact, it is he who has brought me up from Somersetshire. He has purchased Randell's old place in Kent—"Knottoak."'

Maud, with a vague smile to the scientist, who was eloquently describing a recent discovery, listened intently to the reply, but could only catch a few disjointed words.

'. . . Most curious . . . all the time . . . help seeing advertisements . . . be a millionnaire . . . married.'

Then Sir John's clear voice replied, and Maud secretly complimented her father on his splendid vocal organ.

'He appears to be a millionaire already, but I do not think he is married. In fact, I remember his referring to himself as a bachelor when the deed was drawn up. He made a little joke of it when speaking to me.'

'You are a nice old party, you are!' said Maud, mentally apostrophizing her unconscious parent. 'You *knew* I was mad to find them, and you never said a word;' and she shot such a glance at the old gentleman that he hastily put down his wine-glass, and looked interrogatively at her.

'Oh, you may look,' she said to herself complacently. 'Just wait till I get you outside!'

'And so Joe Pontifex has bought Knottoak,' she said carelessly, as they drove home to her aunt's house.

'Er . . . well, yes . . . how did you know that?'

'Oh, a nice old gentleman, a *very* nice old gentleman, informed me at dinner to-night.'

'Ah, it is getting talked about already. I suppose it was Sir William Falconer who told you?'

'Perhaps it was. Joe must be very rich, dad?'

'Immensely rich. He came home a very wealthy man; and I heard to-night that both George and John Pontifex have left him their fortunes, and they

were both rich men. I wonder he does not claim his inheritance, though,' Sir John added, half to himself.

'Has he not claimed it?'

'No. I heard to-night that no answer had been received to the advertisements, though he could scarcely fail to see them.'

'Perhaps he thinks it is a trap.'

'Trap! What trap? Who for?'

'For him. He may have done something wrong over in Australia, and think the advertisements are a sort of trap.'

'Pish! What ideas you do get into your head, Maud! Absurd!' said her father crossly. 'The man is no more in hiding than I am. A fine, handsome, manly young fellow he seems; greatly improved, too. He is certainly rather deaf, but nothing very dreadful . . . he seems rather sensitive about it, though.'

'Poor Joe! How funny it must feel for him to be sensitive!' said the girl satirically. 'Did he remember you, dad?'

'He never knew me intimately,' replied her father stiffly. 'But whatever he was as a boy, he is now a well-mannered fellow; his behaviour has been most modest and unassuming.'

'Wild Joe Pontifex well-mannered, modest, and unassuming! Oh, my goodness gracious, dad!'

'I wish to Heaven, Maud, you would try and talk like a lady,' snapped the old gentleman angrily.

'*Goodness gracious*, indeed! I am sure I do not know where you get your slang words from.'

'Is "goodness gracious" slang? Well, I won't say it again, dad. But about Mr. Modest Pontifex—I mean, Joe. Does he travel all the way from Knottoak to London every day about this tiresome business?'

'Of course not. He has not gone to live there yet; he lives at Eltham, near the Abbey.'

'Thank you kindly, pater. That's just exactly what I wanted to know,' said Maud sweetly.

Sir John made a pettish movement, and leaned back in the carriage; he knew of no reason for concealing Joe Pontifex's address, since he had not been made a recipient of Maud's suspicions; but he was vexed with his daughter for her pertness, and with himself for having been betrayed into saying more than he meant; and so for the rest of their journey he lay back in real or pretended slumber, leaving Maud at leisure to devise means for discovering her friends.

That she utilized the time was soon proved, for after a chat with her aunt next morning, she set off with one of her cousins, a University student, who was only just recovering from a long illness. Tom Roxbergh was only too glad to be her escort. Like most young fellows, he delighted in Maud's harum-scarum ways, and voted her 'a jolly girl, and no mistake.'

Maud decided to go by train, and as she was, to Tom's delight, in one of her very slangiest humours, the lad was kept in a perpetual simmer of laughter during their drive to the station.

'What a girl you are, Lady Mischief!' he said, as they seated themselves in a railway-carriage.

'What did you think I was, stupid—a man?'

Tom's thoughts did not come to words very readily, and as he floundered about in a sea of words which he meant to be complimentary to his pretty cousin, the carriage-door flew open, and, just as the train moved on, a gentleman stepped in.

'Who is that handsome fellow, Tom?' she demanded, as her escort raised his hat.

'Do you mean to say you don't know? Why, that *is* Pontifex—the fellow Uncle John is always trotting about to see. I thought you were going to his place?'

'That Joe Pontifex!'

As he sat gazing abstractedly out of the window, the girl had time to scan him attentively. 'It is Joe,' she thought to herself—'but how improved! and how awfully handsome!'

There must have been some magnetism in her glance, for presently Joe turned and met her eyes, and then, after letting his own orbs linger upon her carelessly for a second, he turned again to the window.

'Tom,' she said sharply, turning to her cousin, 'ask Mr. Pontifex to be good enough to come here.'

'Eh?'

'Tell him to come here,' she said impatiently.

'Do you mean it?'

'Of course I do, you stupid owl. Tell him who I am, and say I shall be glad to renew my acquaintance with him. Go on!'

Tom, like a great many other people, was rather shy of talking to the deaf man, but Maud's influence was too great to be resisted, and he stepped across to Joe Pontifex and delivered his message.

Joe had no choice but to go to her, and, indeed, showed no hesitation, for so long as they were in the train he felt no diffidence in conversing with anyone. Accordingly he bowed, and in his most pleasant manner expressed the delight it gave him to renew his acquaintance with her.

'You seemed rather anxious to get out of my way that morning at Orminster.'

'I am shy since my deafness fell upon me; and perhaps you have heard of my other affliction?' he asked interrogatively.

'Oh, yes; but I can't understand it at all. You met my brother Francis in Australia?'

'Yes; I met him once in Coolgardie,' he said, with a slight change of expression.

'Did you shoot many jamborees in Australia?' she asked demurely.

'I beg your pardon—shoot what?'

'Jamborees—I think that is the word. Frank told me you had a jamboree when he last saw you. It is a kind of kangaroo, is it not?'

'Your brother was mistaken if he said that,' Joe replied coldly. 'The term "jamboree" is used by bushmen to signify a carouse, and your brother most certainly never saw me indulging in that manner.'

'My stars!' thought Maud, stealing a glance at the flushed face of her *vis-à-vis*, 'you've brought your temper home with you, Mr. Joe.'

'Why did you leave Orminster in such a frantic hurry directly you came home? We were all on tip-toe to see you.'

'You were all very kind,' he answered dryly.

'But, look here, Joe,' she said, relapsing into the old intimate style of addressing him, 'there must have been some reason.'

His face grew sterner, and an angry light gleamed in his eyes, but with an effort he controlled himself, and told her shortly how sensitive he had grown since his afflictions.

'But,' she retorted, 'you hear quite well now.'

'That is because we are in the train, and your voice is remarkably . . . clear!'

'Oh, say what you mean,' she said carelessly; 'you *meant* loud. But you seem to be rather bent on avoiding Orminster and its people. Ethel has never written to anyone, and we had no idea where you were living. I thought perhaps that now you were so rich you wanted to cut us all.'

'Indeed, no. We are not settled yet; we are living in a furnished house. But I must say good-bye now,' he added, as they shot through the tunnel. 'I get out in a moment, at Eltham.'

'I was about to call on your mother and sister,' she explained.

'Then I shall have the pleasure of driving you to the house, I hope,' he said pleasantly, with no trace of discomposure on his face.

Considering that Joe had laid his commands upon them not to bring any Orminster people about the place, Mrs. Pontifex and Ethel were both amazed to see him drive up with Maud Hamilton and a strange young gentleman.

Ethel flew to greet her friend, and, after a few commonplaces to the long-legged cousin, hurried Maud off to her own sanctum for a long talk, during which Lady Mischief learned many things which perplexed her.

'But, Ethel, old girl, if he is so good and kind, and has actually had the title-deeds of Knottoak made out in your mother's name, I don't see how he

can be so cold. Perhaps you are too affectionate—some men hate to be slobbered over.'

'I don't slobber!' said Ethel indignantly.

'Well, you know what I mean. Frank always hates me to kiss him; he says I spoil his tie, or his collar, or something.'

'It is nothing like that with Joe, Maud. He sometimes seems to absolutely avoid and fear me, and the next time he kisses me so fiercely it makes me quite creepy.'

'Well, I don't know what to make of it all. I suppose he is Joe right enough. I did think it might be a case of imposture, or that he had committed some crime in Australia, and was afraid of being found out and punished.'

'He would not commit any crime, Maud,' Ethel declared earnestly. 'I am sure he is good; but sometimes I think his loss of memory preys upon his mind, and makes him so miserable that he does not know what to do with himself; and his deafness is a terrible trial. If he was not so big and strong, I am sure some of the people would be rude to him. He is terribly sensitive about that. Only a week ago we were looking at a house, and one of the men was a little deaf, and put up his hand to his ear just as Joe does. Joe's face grew awful. It made me nervous to think of it afterwards.'

'Well, look here, Eth, I can't stay long now; but

you take my advice, and don't be too affectionate—that will bring my gentleman round. . . . Why don't you write to Amy now?'

'I told you what Joe said.'

'Yes; but now I've been here it is different. I shall tell her your address in any case; and as for Joe—tell him to go to Hong-Kong. If he does not want Amy, I am sure she will not need telling twice; she is as proud as a little peacock. And now, Eth, let us go down to the others, old girl. Tom *will* be wild with me for leaving him so long.'

In the hall they met Jack, poring over a book as he progressed slowly along.

'Hullo, Shakespeare!' cried Maud.

'Hullo, Lady Mischief!'

'How is the poetry getting on?'

'Oh, fine!' replied Jack shortly.

Poetry was a sore topic for Maud to discuss with him. She had ridiculed one little poem he had written and given to her to such an extent that he had almost hated her for awhile, and even now the memory of her sarcasm stung him.

There was nothing that Maud could detect in Joe's behaviour to his sister to verify Ethel's confidences, and with a slightly crestfallen air she returned to town, assured that after all there was nothing in Joe Pontifex's history in the Antipodes to make him fear any exposure. And yet she had an uneasy

feeling that somehow she had missed a point, and that there *was* something curious in the returned prodigal.

'What I can't get over,' she thought, 'is his entire change of manner. He was always so hot-tempered and energetic, always in hot water; and now, although he is only twenty-nine, he goes about meek and mild, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth—he has a pleasant mouth, too.'

'I tell you what it is, Maud,' said her cousin, interrupting her soliloquy; 'that Miss Pontifex is the prettiest girl in London.'

'She is pretty, Tom. Are you struck?'

But Tom knew better than to make my Lady Mischief his confidante.

CHAPTER XIII.

KNOTTOAK.

The Pontifexes had been at Eltham for some time, when Joe received a letter from Messrs. Cowell and Linstock, informing him that the fortunes of both his uncles had been left to him absolutely, and requesting him to call and see them at his convenience. He had expected to hear from the firm, for the name of the purchaser of such an old estate as Knottoak could hardly remain unknown for any length of time; still, when the letter arrived, it worried and perplexed him, since, for certain reasons of his own, he did not wish to have anything to do with the bequests.

However, knowing the matter must be faced sooner or later, he sent a type-written letter, fixing the interview for a fortnight later; and, having done this, he endeavoured to put the matter from his mind, and devoted himself to doing everything he

could to make his mother and sister happy. Jack was already packed off to his college. His fresh boyish face and ringing laugh had done much to brighten the little home circle, and after he had left there were times when Joe felt that, in spite of their large and stately home, with its wide demesne, there was something missing that should have been there. He had insisted on having a large staff of servants, and it was one of Mrs. Pontifex's little worries that the domestics had not enough to do; still Joe, with a man's bluntness of perception, insisted on their remaining, with a vague idea that they added to his mother's comfort, and that she only protested from the desire of saving his pocket. But his prodigality did not end here; the allowances he made his mother and sister were to their simple ideas wonderful; and he had at the very first stocked the stables and coach-houses liberally.

The surrounding people had called, and had been favourably impressed with the family, though the master put in an appearance as seldom as he could politely do. But when the return calls had been made, and the house fell into everyday humdrum life in the country, both Mrs. Pontifex and her daughter began to long for the companionship of some of their older friends. To their surprise, Joe did not appear to have any objection to their asking some of the Orminster folk, and, greatly to their own surprise,

both Amy and Maud received warm invitations to Knottoak, which they both accepted.

It was with a strange feeling that Joe drove his sister to the station to meet the visitors. He tried to recall all he had heard of Amy Varrow, but the more he endeavoured to collect his ideas the more confused he grew; . . . the only item which persistently intruded itself was the fact that he had contemplated eloping with her, and had been prevented from carrying out his object.

When they left the carriage, and stood expectant upon the platform, it was as much as he could do to give coherent answers to his sister's questions; and as she noted his embarrassment, the hope grew in her heart that some memory of other days was stirring his mind.

The train came puffing and lumbering in, and as it gave up its small crowd of passengers, Ethel dragged him hither and thither, trying to catch sight of her friends; and for a moment a vague hope sprang up in his mind that after all they had not come.

'I see them, Joe! I see them!' she cried presently, just as the hope was merging into certainty.

Dropping his arm, she rushed to meet her friends, who, escorted by Sir John Hamilton, were quietly approaching them.

As one in a dream, Joe felt himself bowing and

shaking hands with Maud Hamilton and a little veiled, muffled figure, whose face he could not see, and whose voice sounded far off and indistinct.

'I was coming up to London on business in any case,' Sir John said, shaking hands with the brother and sister.

'But, indeed, I trust you will dine and stay the night with us now,' said Joe heartily. 'You know you could not do any business in London to-night in any case, and I am sure my mother would be grieved if so old and kind a friend returned to the City again without coming to see her.'

Sir John hesitated.

'To tell you the truth, I am tempted to accept.'

'Oh, do, Sir John!' cried Ethel impulsively.

'There, dad, you can't resist Eth, I'm sure,' said Maud.

'No; I do not think I can,' he replied. 'I accept with pleasure, Ethel, my dear.'

They were a little crowded in the carriage, and Joe was about to take a seat in the dog-cart which was to follow with the luggage, but there was a general protest.

'There is plenty of room. You are not going to hide away from us any more, Mr. Joe, I can tell you,' said Maud, laughing gaily. 'Is he, Amy?'

He was standing with his hand upon the carriage-door, in the act of shutting it, when she spoke, and

insensibly he bent towards the little, quiet figure to catch her answer.

She drew up her veil as Maud spoke, and murmured an indistinct reply.

Joe glanced in surprise at the small, white face. Was this the girl who was willing to have eloped with him! this fragile little mite, whose small gloved hands were trembling so that she could scarcely fasten up her veil!

He gave a sigh of relief as he looked at her. He had seen her photograph, and it had given him an entirely different idea. With a sense of having passed some threatened danger, he sprang in opposite her, and she gave him one quick, apprehensive look. Her eyes contracted, widened, hardened, and then gleamed with strange excitement.

It was only momentary, but not only Joe, but the girls, noticed the intensity of the look, and each drew her own conclusions.

'She is surprised at his remarkable improvement,' thought Maud.

'She is frightened, poor little thing!' Ethel said to herself, as she drew a tiny hand into hers and squeezed it lovingly.

But Joe translated the look more truly.

'She *knows*,' he said to himself grimly.

But if Amy knew anything startling about her host, she gave no sign of her knowledge, and though

she only spoke in monosyllables, her quietness was not noticed in the gay sparring which Maud started with Joe, and to which, roused by a sense of danger into recklessness, he responded with a readiness and vivacity which fairly astonished his sister.

The gay badinage was resumed when they dined, and even Sir John and Mrs. Pontifex were moved to laughter at the adroitness with which Maud's chaff and nonsense were thrown back at her; and Ethel was enchanted at her brother's repartee, and secretly envied Maud the clear, strong voice which enabled Joe to hear her every word.

'*Isn't* Joe handsome, Amy?' Ethel asked her quiet friend, under cover of a general laugh.

But Amy only nodded, and smiled absently.

Sir John was charmed with Joe, and when the duel between Maud and her host ended, and the 'Wanderer,' as Maud insisted on styling him, was beguiled into reminiscences of Australian Bush life, they all listened with interest to the graphic scenes which he depicted in well-chosen words.

'I hope Frank will come back as much improved,' thought the Baronet, eyeing Joe in a friendly manner; 'he is a splendid young fellow.'

But his genial smile soon died away, for on the termination of one of his short anecdotes Maud assailed Joe again, and unfortunately began to inter-

lard her conversation with the slang which she had so far scrupulously avoided.

'I would like to box her ears, the young minx!' Sir John muttered to himself, as the obnoxious phrases became more and more prominent, and Joe's manner stiffened in proportion. 'Can't she see he does not like that miserable jargon?'

The others seemed not to mind. 'It was only Maud,' they thought. And even Mrs. Pontifex, though she had an old-fashioned horror of slang, would not perhaps have observed it had she not noted the gathering sternness which was rapidly overclouding Joe's whilom smiling face.

'What was Frank doing when you saw him in Coolgardie?' Maud said suddenly, apropos of nothing.

'He was at the same hotel as myself, with the Premier's party, I think.'

'And you, were you with them, too?' she inquired innocently.

'I? Oh dear no! I was only a rough miner, having a little recreation after my toil in the Bush.'

'Oh, recreation is the English for "jamboree," then?'

'I thought I had already explained that word,' he said coldly. 'It means a carouse.'

'How delightfully expressive! isn't it, father?'

But Sir John only scowled. He could see Joe did

not admire the line the conversation had taken, and to himself it was always a penance to listen to it.

'Surely the girl can see how distasteful that talk is to everyone,' he growled to himself.

And he was the more annoyed since Joe had appeared to evince a decided partiality for Maud's conversation at first, and had feverishly kept the talk going, without taking any particular notice of Amy, and it must be owned that Sir John had allowed his thoughts to drift into a speculative channel, in which Joe and Maud had figured conspicuously. But as they left the dining-room and went straight to the drawing-room—for neither Sir John nor Joe cared to linger over the wine—the Baronet saw Amy suddenly drop back to Maud and Joe, and say a few words to the latter.

'Come away somewhere; make some excuse,' she had said.

And accordingly they were no sooner seated than Joe suggested a visit to the tower, and as Ethel and Maud declared they wanted a few minutes' respite, and Amy alone signified her desire to go, they went out together, and Sir John's little dream went out with them.

To all outward seeming the two were on good enough terms as they strolled down the length of the large drawing-room, and Ethel smiled happily to herself as she pictured the result which she felt

sure must follow; and Maud, as she watched the tall, strong man bending down courteously to catch his companion's words, put her handkerchief to her eyes, and affected to weep.

'He's thrown me over, Eth,' she said dramatically; 'my slang has spoiled my chance of being your sister-in-law.'

Steadily and in silence Amy and Joe mounted the long winding staircase till they reached the tower roof. The girl rested, panting, against the cold stone parapet, trying to regain her breath.

'Now,' she said presently 'tell me everything.'

'Everything?'

'Yes; from the beginning.'

'There is hardly time——'

'There *shall* be time,' she cried passionately. 'Tell me!'

Her white face gleamed, marble-like, against the dark 'cloud' she had gathered about her head and throat; her voice rang out like clarion notes upon the sharp night air, and the man shuddered involuntarily as he saw her eyes glittering with excitement and apprehension.

As he began the tale he had to tell—a tale of sin and suffering—his voice faltered, his hands fumbled nervously upon the parapet, and he looked away from her out into the night; but as his story grew to the crisis the words came fluently, he turned

towards her, and flung his wild, passionate sentences at her as a criminal, hopeless, might speak before his judge, using no words save those necessary to tell his story coherently, but speaking them in such a voice of pathos and despair that Amy started now and then to find herself almost pitying him.

The tale grew to a close, his voice ceased, and still she stood looking out across the twinkling lights which dotted the darkened earth, until presently her calmness gave way, and she leaned her head upon the parapet and sobbed in hopeless misery.

He stood silently by her, watching pitifully the slight frail figure, his heart bleeding for her sorrow, but powerless to comfort her.

She raised her white face after awhile, and asked in a low, broken voice:

'You have told me *everything?*'

'Everything, so help me God!'

Again she bent her head upon her arms, and sobbed silently, till at last he could bear it no longer.

'You will make yourself ill,' he said, gently touching her.

As his hand fell upon her she started up, and drew herself away indignantly.

'Don't touch me! Do not come near me! Do not speak to me!' she said wildly; and then as he moved away she drew towards him, and said in a voice vibrating with emotion, yet clear and distinct:

'I believe you have spoken the truth. I do not know what to do, but I will not betray you. Sooner or later your punishment will fall upon you, but I will not be the one to hasten it. Only remember that, between you and me, there can be nothing on my side but dread and abhorrence. Whatever your provocation may have been, you are a murderer.'

He made a gesture with his hands.

'It was done unwittingly,' he said. 'I forgot what lay behind him . . . and I have suffered.'

'You deserve to. Such a sin as yours can never be forgotten. I could almost pity you when I think of it. Night and day you must remember it. All your wealth cannot help you. Your strength and youth, your very affliction, will all make it more awful as the time goes by. You may live to be an old man, and yet never lose the dread of discovery.'

'Do you think I do not know that?' he said bitterly. 'Do you think I do not think of it always? Why, sometimes I almost think it would be better to end it all at once.'

'A coward's refuge,' she said, instinctively divining his meaning.

'It may be——'

'I believe these blessed old steps lead right up to old Mother Moon!' cried Maud Hamilton from the stairway. 'How much further is it, Eth?'

Amy started.

'Remember,' she said, 'do nothing rash; I shall not betray you. It is all too sudden to think of properly; only—be kind to them. I think I understand what you mean to do.'

'Jerusalem! I shall have to *crawl*, soon,' came Maud's strong clear voice.

'We had better go down quickly if you wish to avoid them,' Joe said hurriedly; and with a nod Amy muffled her face, and rapidly descended, he following more slowly.

'Hullo, there! Stop!' cried Maud, as Amy brushed past her on the stairway.

But Amy hurried on, and Joe came to her rescue by assisting Lady Mischief up the few remaining steps.

'Well,' she said, peering over the parapet into the darkness, 'I dare say it's fine enough in the daytime, but it's only fit for mouldy old owls in the evening. Why, I can't see anything.'

'No, there is not much to see.'

'You are speaking mighty solemnly, Mr. Joe. Have you been quarrelling with Amy?'

'No, not that.'

'What then?'

'I have been confessing my sins.'

'Oh, Amy won't believe you have any. She and your mother think you a perfect encyclopædia of all the virtues. It's a good thing for a man to have

such stout partizans, I can tell you, especially a man with such an awful reputation as you have in Orminster. No one thinks you much of a saint except those two. Still, I wouldn't be gloomy;' and then in a strong contralto voice she sang·

> 'Every lad must have his fling
> Ere he buys the wedding-ring,
> Whether ploughman, priest, or king—
> They're all human, after all!'

'So cheer up, Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance, for you're "human, after all!"' she lilted lightly, as she descended the stairway again.

They re-entered the drawing-room later, to find Amy had retired on the plea of a bad headache; and Ethel, guessing something was amiss with her brother, hovered anxiously about him till they all separated for the night.

'If she only knew!' he groaned to himself, as he watched his sister's wistful face looking back at him as she went slowly down the hall.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLEM HAY.

Don McIntyre was puzzled. His patient grew rapidly stronger in bodily health, but after the first day of the apparent semi-recovery of his faculties he lapsed into a state which was more disconcerting than his previous comatose condition. No longer quiescent, he roamed about the hills seemingly in quest of something which he never found. He shunned the society of the others, and never replied to their advances. For Welldridge he appeared to have an inveterate dislike, and no efforts of the rough but kind-hearted digger succeeded in bringing the man to regard him with other than distrustful and watchful eyes.

His incessant wanderings were a cause of great anxiety to them at first, the more especially as he generally made his way sooner or later to the little plateau between the two crests or wings of the hills,

and would lie there face downwards intently peering into the desert beyond. After awhile, finding no harm came to him, they relaxed their watchfulness, and allowed him to wander at will, for he always returned to the camp at nightfall, and would creep to his allotted couch and lie there, staring with knitted brows at the roof of the hut. They had made a rough Bush-lamp out of a tin filled with fat, and by this light they sometimes played cards, or did some necessary sewing or boot-repairing; but the silent man in the corner never appeared to notice the manner of their employment, or to evince any interest in themselves. He took the food he wanted without speaking. If it was proffered when he did not choose to take it, he simply shook his head and walked away.

'I wish Marna was here,' said Charlie one night, as he and Dixon played cards by the light of the rude lamp.

'Why?'

'I'd like to hear that yarn about the Wings of Silence; you know, he told the Doctor down on Ingelappa Plains.'

'I can tell you, Charlie,' cried Welldridge from outside the hut, where he and McIntyre were smoking together; and forthwith he related the story.

'My Gow!' exclaimed the driver, nodding towards the stranger; 'seems as if that fellow had had the

bally wings spread over him. He is as dumb as a bullock yoke.'

'If it comes to that,' chimed in Dixon, 'he *did* have the wings over him. . . . He was found lying under them . . . wasn't he?'

Charlie started open mouthed at the speaker.

'My Gow!' he said, looking uncomfortable. 'You don't think that yarn was true, do you?'

The other two had entered, and they all laughed at his apprehensions.

'Oh, it's all bally fine!' retorted Charlie; 'but there's a good deal in some of the blacks' yarns, I can tell you.'

'I don't believe that gin—what's her name?—Murninnie—said anything of the sort,' said Dixon contemptuously. 'Marna was afraid to come any further, and he made up the lies himself.'

'De mortuis, you know, Dixon,' interjected the Doctor.

'What's that?' asked Charlie suspiciously.

'Don't blackguard dead fellows,' said the other, rather proud to show his knowledge; 'all the same, Doctor, he *was* an awful liar, and a thief, too.'

'Well, I was sorry to lose him; he was a merry fellow, and his death was a great blow to us.'

They had observed, and, in a casual way, chaffed Marna, the black fellow, on his liking for the thin, ugly bushwoman when she first came into camp;

but when she ran away from the sound of the violin, they imagined they had seen the last of her. But, partly attracted by the music, and partly by the bribes of food which Marna proffered her, the woman had followed the party at a distance during the day, and with her child shared Marna's rations and quarters at night. However, in their wake came her husband Kalkari; at first stealthily and in fear that the beasts with spears on their heads should devour him, or those other beasts turn upon him and trample him in the dust; but afterwards more confidently, till at last, one night, he stole in upon his disloyal consort and Marna, and stabbed the man with his long jagged spear; then with a blow from his knobkerri killed the puny child, and dragged the terrified woman with him back into the wilds.

It had been a great blow to McIntyre and Welldridge to lose Marna, for he was, for a blackfellow, very capable, and his ready resource and skill in Bush lore had carried them over many perils. Now they had to rely entirely upon themselves; and shortly after they had buried the man and child they came upon the worst stage of their long and dangerous journey.

They had been recalling these things on the evening when Charlie referred to the blackfellow's absence and to the stranger's silence. To divert their thoughts

the Doctor took out his violin, for the first time since they had struck gold:

'Loud and clear the magpie warbles of another day in sight,
Tho' the moon still glimmers coldly overhead;
The first messengers of morning streak the mantle of the night,
And the crested hills to eastward, rosy red.'

Chorus, boys!' he cried.

'Oh, the salt-bush, and the blue-bush,
And the deep reed-fringed lagoon,
The samphire and the camp-fire glowing red!
Oh, the jingle of the hobbles,
And the bright light of the moon,
And the 'possums in the gum-trees overhead!'

It was a pleasant evening, and finding the hut close, the four men went outside, the Doctor taking his violin with him. A little later, as, with the instrument under his chin, he turned his head casually in the direction of the hut, he caught a glimpse of the stranger watching him from the doorway. Without appearing to notice him, the Doctor continued playing; at the same time he watched the man furtively, and observed that, step by step, he drew nearer, until at last he sat down on the log by the side of the unconscious bullock-driver, who was lustily roaring out the chorus of a song, a good two notes behind the others. With a start of genuine alarm, Charlie vacated his seat.

'Dash him!' he said angrily; 'he scared my life out of me, creeping up like that. I don't like the looks of him.'

'Shut up!' said McIntyre hastily, and still continuing his playing, but dropping from one tune into another, while he endeavoured in the moonlight to observe the strange man's expression.

Suddenly he stopped playing, and put down the instrument; and immediately the other snatched up the violin, and held out his other hand for the bow.

The whole party watched him breathlessly, Dixon muttering a presentiment that he would break the thing to pieces; but he did no such thing. After one or two timid sweeps of the bow, he dashed off into a lively jig, then a hornpipe, and other dance music; till Charlie, unable to remain quiescent, jumped from the ground, and proceeded to perform a ponderous series of capers, to the amusement of his companions, and the evident grave gratification of the stranger.

After this, the Doctor left the violin-case in a prominent place in the hut, and often, while working, they heard the stranger playing to himself. Sometimes he wandered off, taking the instrument with him; and from far up the cliffs the faint strains would be borne down to them, and occasionally against the sky-line they would see the tall, strong figure perched on the summit of one of the wings.

The Doctor regarded the playing as being a step in the direction of the recovery of his patient's intellect.

'He is not mad as we generally understand madness; there is a suspension of the faculties, and I consider it quite possible that he will ultimately recover his senses.'

The others, in spite of their admiration for the Doctor's skill and learning, had small faith in the fulfilment of his prognostications; and as time went on, and the big, useless fellow showed no signs of improvement, even Don McIntyre began to lose hope.

One thing, indeed, they had to thank him for—an addition to their larder in the shape of a root or tuber which they accidentally saw him eating. On inspection it turned out to be an excellent substitute for flour. The roots, after being washed and dried in the sun, were ground into a coarse meal; and, as their flour was exhausted, this addition to their food supply was as welcome as it was unexpected; and, fortunately, the roots grew in great quantities in the neighbourhood of the camp.

They had once or twice tried to induce him to go down the shaft, or assist in the work; but the man drew back angrily from the shaft's mouth, and appeared incapable of understanding what was required of him above ground. They did not persist in their efforts, though Welldridge looked with regret at the muscular figure which might have proved so valuable an ally if he had only chosen.

But a fresh turn was soon given to their thoughts. All the week Welldridge and Dixon—the two most experienced of the party as regarded gold digging—had been grumbling at the turn matters were taking at the claim. They both agreed that a fresh development had occurred, and Welldridge in particular was sure that they had passed through the auriferous ground, and were working on stuff which was not worth wasting time on.

The next Sunday morning Charlie started off as usual to divert the water, while the others stood round the troughing trying to appear unconcerned. Presently the flow ceased, the blanketing was left bare, and the party stepped slowly along the little footpath which they had already beaten in along the gully side.

It was nothing unusual for the first few barriers to be without any of the precious metal, but the party proceeded further and further, and the result was still the same; their faces lengthened considerably.

'There's not a single nugget!' ejaculated Dixon in dudgeon as they came to the outlet, and stood dejectedly looking down on the heap of refuse which had been deposited near the banks of the creek.

'We'll have to prospect round and get another claim, that's all,' said the Doctor cheerfully.

'I wish that fellow Hay would recover his wits,'

growled Welldridge; 'I expect he has fossicked all over these hills, and could put us on to something good, right away. Look at him!'

They all looked in the direction which Welldridge pointed out. The man, perched high up on the cliffs, was playing upon the violin, and from where they stood the others could faintly hear the melody.

'By Jove! he's playing "Bushland,"' cried Welldridge. 'If he's got enough sense to learn a tune, he ought to be able to talk, eh, Doctor Don?'

McIntyre smiled. 'Perhaps; let us go up and have a yarn with him; it's not very hot yet.'

Dixon was cook, and Charlie preferred to stroll down to the cool and sheltered lagoon, so only Welldridge and the Doctor climbed the hill.

The man was so absorbed in his music that he failed to observe their approach for some time, and they were only about fifty yards below him when he became aware of their presence.

'Hullo!' yelled Welldridge, waving his hand in recognition and encouragement as he saw the afflicted man suddenly look round and start to his feet.

The man immediately stepped back out of view, and a few moments later, when Welldridge and the Doctor had climbed to the summit, there was no trace of him.

'Dash him! he can't be far,' exclaimed Welldridge as he looked round the slopes.

'He is not in sight, anyway,' replied the Doctor; 'but I don't see where he can be hiding.'

Welldridge, who was a very obstinate man, immediately began hunting about for some trace, but the Doctor with a laugh began filling his pipe.

'What does it matter?' he said lightly; 'he will turn up by-and-by.'

Welldridge, however, was not to be deterred from his hunt, and he, too, presently disappeared from the Doctor's ken. It was growing a trifle warm, but there was still some shadow on the western side of the rocks, and reclining in the coolest place he could find, Don McIntyre lay down to smoke and reflect.

He was rather tired, the pipe had a soothing effect, and presently the Doctor dropped into a doze from which he was awakened by a loud shout. Not quite sure from whence the noise came, he ran to the highest point of vantage, and almost directly his eye caught sight of two writhing forms on the little plateau below.

A glance sufficed to show that the man on top was the madman Clem Hay, and his victim was doubtless Welldridge. They were already dangerously near the edge of the precipice, and McIntyre, rushing down past the boulders and over the loose stones at headlong speed, knew that he needed to strain every effort if he was to reach the plateau in time,

for Welldridge, though a powerful man, was no match for his younger and bigger antagonist.

There was no pathway, and at times he lost his footing and fell heavily as he hurried onwards; but presently the plateau lay beneath him, and there on the very verge of the cliff the madman kneeled over his prostrate companion. He looked round with angry eyes as Don McIntyre leaped to the ground, and made a movement as if to precipitate his victim over the ledge.

Don stood still, afraid to advance lest he should cause Welldridge to be killed, and yet determined not to retire if he could possibly help it. The madman looked at him cunningly, and gave the prostrate form a slight push; as he did so the Doctor could see that Welldridge's eyes were wide open, and in spite of his deadly peril he seemed to be quite cool and collected.

For quite two minutes Don stood looking on at the strange scene, then when he judged that his action was unobserved he cautiously advanced a few inches, but at the movement Hay rolled his helpless captive still further east, so that his head was already over the cliff. Furtively watching McIntyre's movements, Hay presently caught hold of Welldridge's ankles, and then cautiously rising from his kneeling position, began letting the unfortunate man over the cliff inch by inch.

So far Welldridge had uttered no sound, but now there broke from him a hoarse cry for help, the sound of which seemed to afford Hay intense gratification, for he drew him back a little and looked down on him with an evil smile.

But in his excitement he forgot the Doctor, and now, just as Welldridge's shoulders slipped over the ledge for the third time, Don flung himself upon the madman, and, grasping one of Welldridge's legs with one hand, struck Hay a heavy blow in the face with the other.

It was fortunate that Welldridge was a cool and self-possessed man, and had enough nerve to assist in his own rescue, for a moment later Hay, with a snarl of rage, had closed with the Doctor, and on that small plateau, with only one witness, was fought as tough a fight as ever two men engaged in.

At first Don, secure in his science and experience, kept on the defensive, but it was soon apparent that his opponent cared nothing for punishment, and was only intent on gripping his enemy and dragging him over the cliff. Three times the madman succeeded in getting his arms around Don's body, and each time the Doctor had harder work to release himself. They were both panting; Hay was bleeding copiously, and his dirty flannel shirt was soaked with blood, but he still kept up the attack with undiminished ferocity, and it was evident that he meant to kill

the Doctor even if he sacrificed himself in the effort. Once more he got his arms around Don's waist, and in spite of the heavy blows showered upon him he clung to the Doctor, and stubbornly wrenched and tugged him towards the precipice.

Welldridge had scarcely regained his breath, but now, as he saw Don's danger, he started forward, and catching Hay by the legs lifted them with a jerk from the ground, and in a few minutes they managed to secure him by means of his own and their belts.

As they sat wiping their streaming faces and keeping a sharp look-out for any attempt of their prisoner to escape, they noticed a sudden change come over him. His contortions became terrible, the mad paroxysm of rage changed to one of indescribable pain.

'It's a cataleptic fit,' cried the Doctor, watching him carefully. 'We must get him away from here. Call for the others.'

CHAPTER XV.

THE STRANGER REVEALS HIS IDENTITY.

THE members of the little party were beginning to lose their good spirits under their misfortunes, and, indeed, the outlook was getting serious. The prospecting had not been successful; the original claim, or pocket, was evidently worked out, and McIntyre's whole attention was now occupied with his unfortunate patient.

Perhaps Don was the least disheartened of any of them, for he was intensely interested in the developments of his charge's illness, and in his congenial occupation of combating the attack by which the stranger had been prostrated he found plenty of occupation for his thoughts; but the others, toiling without success day after day, and seeing their food supplies rapidly diminishing without prospect of replacement, grew apprehensive as to their future.

'I believe he is pulling through,' said Don cheer-

fully one evening, as they discussed their late meal by the side of the hut, 'and I should not be surprised if he comes out of it a well man.'

'What do you mean by a "well man"?' interrogated Welldridge—'in his right mind?'

'Yes; physically and mentally recovered.'

'By the time he gets all right we shall be starving, though,' growled Dixon; 'there are only four bullocks left now.'

'Four! Well, they'll last ever so long, and there's plenty of roots—enough in this valley alone for twelve months.'

'But,' growled Dixon, 'suppose we don't find any more alluvial? There's plenty of reefs, I know, but they are no good without machinery.'

Welldridge nodded.

'That's so. I think if we don't hit on alluvial soon, that our best plan will be to peg out a mineral claim, make tracks for civilization, and come back with machinery. The stuff we've got would suffice to buy a good plant and pay all expenses—and over.'

'That fellow,' said Don, nodding towards the hut in which the stranger lay, 'cannot be moved for another ten days at the least.'

'Well, let's put in another fortnight's prospecting. If we don't get anything in that time, I vote we track for home,' said Welldridge.

'"Home, home, sweet home,
There's no place like home,"'

sang the Doctor. 'You're all in the dumps to-night, boys. I'll get out the fiddle and cheer you up. I've been in worse places than this before now, and I always came out on top.'

They knew by his manner that one of his lighter moods was upon him, and Charlie grinned with delight as he entered the hut and came back with his violin-case.

'We'll have songs all round first. Now, Charlie, what will you give us?'

It was a standing joke with them to ask Charlie to sing, but he rarely gave an exhibition in public. To-night, however, he braced himself for an effort, and with suspicious readiness asked:

'Do you know this air, Doctor?'

Don listened smilingly, and presently caught the melody.

'All right,' he said; 'go on; I've got it.'

'Eight fat bullocks at the start,
Messmates, messmates, follow me!
Pulling away at a bally old cart—
Glory hallelujah!
One old bullock went and died,
Messmates, messmates, follow me!
We ate him all except the hide—
Glory hallelujah!
Three more bullocks we've eat since then,
Messmates, messmates, follow me!
We've now got four—so I'll say Amen!
Glory hallelujah!'

'I made that myself,' Charlie informed them, after their laughter had subsided.

'How long did it take you, Charlie?'

But the bullock-driver fenced with the question.

'Oh, a bit of a while, you know,' he said carelessly. 'It ain't bad, is it?' he asked confidently.

'You sang about bullocks; I'll give you some lines Whyte Melville wrote about a horse, "The Place where the old Horse died,"' said Welldridge.

When the evening had passed away and they turned into their bunks, they were all in much better spirits—for, indeed, it was almost impossible to resist the infection of Don's merriment when he chose to exert himself, and as Welldridge noted by the light of the guttering lamp the splendid proportions and fine countenance of his companion he wondered again how it came that a man so blessed with everything conducive to success in life should be in such a position.

It was a common enough experience to the gold-digger to meet men of exceptional talents in some particular line—men who were good musicians or artists, clever business men, or well-educated fellows, who could turn their hand to almost anything, and yet were in a chronic state of impecuniosity, but amongst all these he had sooner or later detected the flaw which kept them from success. In the majority of cases the drink-passion was the cause of their

failure; in some cases there was an inherent impulse to dishonesty, and in no case which he could call to mind had any of these clever social failures emerged from the slough in which they wallowed, if not willingly, at least without sustained effort to escape. But Don McIntyre was in a different category; there seemed no reason why he should not hold a high place amongst his fellows, and with these things in his mind, Welldridge asked the question which had long perplexed him.

'McIntyre,' he said, 'how is it that, with all your advantages, you haven't done better for yourself?'

Don was luckily in an excellent humour, and with a light laugh he replied:

'I'll tell you some day—when we've made our fortune.'

'I shan't hear that story for some time,' retorted Welldridge dryly.

Before the ten days which the Doctor had mentioned as being necessary to his patient's recovery had elapsed, there was a gradual but decided improvement in the sick man's condition, and one day, as Don was busy preparing the everlasting stew for dinner, he heard a sound from the hut which caused him to leave his culinary operations unfinished and make for the bedside of the stranger. He was lying with his eyes wide open, and, though evidently a little dazed and uncertain of his whereabouts, was

apparently in possession of his faculties. He looked languidly at the Doctor, and then with a puzzled air at his surroundings.

'Where am I?' he asked.

'You are in a hut built near the side of your old tent—do you remember it?'

'Where's Clem?'

'Clem?'

'Yes—Clem Hay.'

Don felt his heart misgive him. 'The poor beggar is not right, after all,' he thought regretfully; 'and yet he looks sensible.' However, he resolved to humour him.

'Oh, he's not in just now,' he said lightly; 'how are you feeling—a bit weak?'

'Rather; what's happened?'

'You had a fit—cataleptic. I am a doctor, and luckily I was by at the time.'

The sick man was staring curiously at him.

'How long have I been ill?' he asked suspiciously.

'Oh, a good while—several weeks.'

The man looked at him steadfastly for a moment, then, closing his eyes, he turned his face away.

'There's something I can't remember,' he said perplexedly.

'Oh, don't go worrying about remembering things yet. I want you to take this; it will do you good.'

The man did as he was bid, and presently fell into

a quiet sleep. Don only left him for a few minutes to hastily set the pot and billy on the fire; and when the others returned from their prospecting they found him still watching over the sleeping man. He had thrown one hand palm upward upon the bed, and as the others stood round looking at him, Welldridge gave a sudden start.

'By Jove!' he said, 'it's not Clem Hay after all.'

'What!' ejaculated Don.

'Clem had a terrible burn up at Carrawinnie when they were branding cattle; he fell on the red-hot iron, and it left half the station brand on him for life. I remember it as well as if it was yesterday. I wonder I never thought of it before. There is no brand on this man's arm.'

'Perhaps it's on the other,' suggested Dixon.

But though they made a cautious inspection of the other arm, there was no such disfigurement as Welldridge had described.

'If he isn't Clem Hay,' said Dixon, 'who is he?'

'He is the very spit of Clem. I can't understand it,' muttered Welldridge. . . . 'I wonder if he is Pontifex?'

'Shouldn't be surprised; but you fellows must clear out now, he's waking up.'

They went out quietly, but the patient awoke before the last man had gone out.

'Was that Clem?' he asked, peering across the hut.

'No; that was one of my party—Phil Welldridge; heard of him?' Don asked tentatively.

'Don't think so. Why doesn't Clem come?'

'He's away just now.'

'There's something on my mind about Clem,' the other said fretfully. 'What the devil is it, I wonder?'

McIntyre tried in vain to distract his attention. He lay back, knitting his brows and pondering over the elusive memory.

'I remember,' he said presently in excited tones —'the cliff! the cliff! That's why I am ill; Clem threw me over!'

'But you're getting all right now, you know; and you must not excite yourself, or you will be ill again.'

The man glared angrily round.

'When will that murdering hound be back?' he cried savagely.

'Hay—never! He left the day we got here; we did not see him, only his tracks.'

The man gave a gesture of despair, and uttered a moan.

'He has taken the gold and gems.'

'I don't know what he took, but he is gone, and you are here, and must do what I tell you if you want to get well; it will be your own fault if you become ill again. A few days will make a wonderful difference if you are quiet, but another ebullition

of rage may be fatal. You are Joseph Pontifex, are you not?'

'Yes.'

'Well, be a man. Forget your comrade's treachery; remember that you are a young man yet, and that there is plenty of time before you. There may be more gold here yet.'

'Have you been working here?'

'Yes, on your old shaft. Why do you smile?'

'I'll tell you later on; tell me about what you've been doing.'

Don humoured him and told him of their work in the shaft, of their engineering the water to the workings, of their primary success, and the subsequent failure of the 'pocket.' From this he branched off into a description of his companions and their method of amusing themselves.

'What! Do you play? Have you got a violin?' asked Pontifex. 'I play a little myself.'

'I know you do,' said Don incautiously; and then, as the sick man looked his astonishment, he explained how he had gained his information.

'Was I *mad?*' asked Pontifex suddenly.

'A bit delirious, you know—nothing uncommon.'

Joe Pontifex stared at him thoughtfully.

'I guess I've been pretty bad,' he said; 'I'll make that——'

'H'sh!' said Don deprecatingly. 'I won't have

any threats till you are stronger; you can threaten as much as you like then, but now the subject is taboo.'

'Well, I won't; only I hope I'll get well soon, Doctor, for I'm simply dying to have my say about that sneaking——'

'Now! now!'

'Oh, well——'

'I'll get out the violin, eh? And I'll introduce you to your new mates. Shall I?'

The other assented, and in a little while Joe had made the acquaintance of his new comrades. Don would not let them remain long, for fear of injudicious remarks, so he began playing softly.

'I say,' cried Joe, 'I like that bullock-thumper, and the hard-faced chap—Welldridge. The pimply-faced beggar don't look up to much; but, taking you all round, I like your party.'

The Doctor made him a mock obeisance.

'Glad to meet with your approbation,' he said jocularly; 'and you're right about the fellows. Phil Welldridge is a real "white man," and Charlie is a rough diamond. You will like Dixon better when you know him.'

'And they are pottering round fossicking for alluvial all day, eh?'

'Yes; they go out prospecting.'

'Well, they can stop that right away. I suppose I owe my life to you?'

'I suppose so,' admitted Don.

'Well, it wasn't a bad day's work for you all, for Clem only had four camels, and he can't have taken all the stuff away; there's enough for ten times four camel-loads in the cave alone.'

'The cave!'

'Yes, I'll tell you later on.'

'Well, but if that is so, why were you so angry at his going off with some of the gold?'

'I forgot he only had four camels; I wasn't very clear just at first. But I know he couldn't carry all that loot, for we were talking about blocking up the cave when we had the row—when the——'

'H'sh!'

CHAPTER XVI.

HIDDEN TREASURE.

THE next morning Joe Pontifex awakened with his mind clear and vigorous, and as none of the party had gone out prospecting, on account of the hints he had given McIntyre, the whole party assembled after breakfast to hear more definite particulars of the treasure. They had fixed a comfortable seat for Pontifex on the shady side of the hut, and here, with the whole party assembled round him, Joe held his court.

'You would never dream of there being a cave in the cliff side,' he began, 'and it was quite by chance that Clem discovered it; he had been out hunting for lizards, for our stock of food was getting very low, and we could not afford to kill any of the camels.

'The entrance to the cave is on the right hand side of the little open space or plateau, between "the Wings." When Clem found it the entrance was

almost blocked by a big boulder, and we prized it back till there was room to squeeze through. I don't wonder you did not notice it, for there are so many great rocks about there, and nothing to indicate the existence of a hiding-place. I can't go up with you myself, so the Doctor says, but you can't miss it now you know where to look. The entrance is about six feet from the beginning of the plateau, on the right-hand side. It only goes in about three feet in a straight line, and then turns to the left, and you will have to crawl on your hands and knees in the direction of the desert—that's east—for about twelve feet. You will be in the cave then, and you'll see why there's no need for any more prospecting. The Doctor has told me the terms under which you formerly worked together,' he said, addressing Charlie and Dixon, 'and he and Mr. Welldridge have agreed to allow you two a twentieth each of the whole pile; the remainder will be equally divided between the Doctor, Mr. Welldridge, and myself. You will find that this distribution will be far better for you than the fixed wages and the percentage you formerly received.'

Dixon looked doubtful.

'What do you reckon my whack will figure out?' he asked cautiously.

'About two hundred thousand pounds.'

'What!'

'Two hundred thousand pounds.'

'My Gow!' ejaculated Charlie, scrambling to his legs; 'I'm on, mister.'

'And the others—what would you get?' persisted Dixon.

'About twelve hundred thousand pounds each.'

'Great Scott! Do you mean to say there's four millions of money?'

'Go and see,' retorted Pontifex, leaning back in his seat; 'if you don't like the terms, you can go back to your original agreement with Mr. Welldridge.'

'*Not me!*' cried Charlie, stamping impatiently about with a huge provision-bag in his hand.

They started off presently, leaving Pontifex in his comfortable resting-place, and soon made their way up the steep hillside, and reached the plateau.

Charlie was the first on the scene, and as the others arrived, panting and tired, they caught a glimpse of his boots disappearing in the narrow crevice which they had once or twice noticed, but had taken little heed of, since a stick poked into it only penetrated a very short distance, and there was no indication of its continuation in another direction. They groped along after Charlie on their hands and knees, and presently emerged into a long low cave. It ran parallel with the face of the Wings for about thirty feet, and was about six or seven feet wide. On the east the crevices in the rocks let in ample light to distinguish the surroundings, some of the openings

being an inch wide; and from the larger ones a bird's-eye view could be obtained of the desert beyond.

Both the walls and floor were of solid rock, and very uneven, and it was evident that the cave was a natural formation, though the entrance to it must have been fashioned by man. They spent very little time, however, in studying the cave itself, for the booty which they had come in search of was plainly in evidence, and on it they concentrated their undivided attention.

All along the inner wall—that further away from the cliffs, and the best lighted part—a rough barrier or manger had been made by piling large fragments of rock in a long line, about eighteen inches from the wall; and here, heaped up in an apparently confused mass, were such stores of the precious metal as the adventurers had never dreamed of. They bent over the manger in wonderment, idly fingering and balancing the treasures it contained.

'They are arranged according to size—big nuggets in this crib, and smaller ones in each of the lower ones,' said Welldridge at last, as he walked slowly along; and then he uttered a low whistle as he came to the last compartment, and stood staring incredulously down at it.

'What is it?' cried the others simultaneously.

'Gad!' he said in bewilderment, 'I believe it's

everything! Diamonds, rubies, amethysts, emeralds —the Lord only knows what!'

One by one they bent over the latest find, and taking the gems in their hands, held them to the light and scrutinized them wonderingly.

'I'm no judge of the value of these things,' said Don presently, 'but they must be worth an enormous sum.'

'They are,' replied Welldridge; 'there's not much doubt about that.'

'But where on earth did they come from?' inquired Dixon in amazement.

Welldridge smiled.

'That's more than I can tell you; but I am satisfied with knowing where they are going.'

'Still, it is mysterious,' said McIntyre, coming out of a reverie. 'Fancy here, in the centre of the most sterile and apparently worthless portion of Australia, coming upon such a find as this!'

Welldridge sat down on the floor with his back resting against the stone manger or bin, and began filling his pipe.

'It's not so wonderful as you think,' he said slowly. 'What was Kimberley before the diamond-fields were discovered? Not what you would call a paradise, anyway.'

'If it comes to that,' interjected Don, 'it's not a paradise now.'

'Well, it's my experience that in the majority of cases the earth's greatest mineral wealth is hidden in the country which is apparently worthless. It seems as if Nature in fashioning such unlovely places slipped in the more valuable products as a recompense for its lack of beauty. Of course, some fields are situated in beautiful spots, but many of the richest of them are the reverse.'

'It's a deuced lucky thing for us, this case,' said Dixon, moving his hand about amongst the jewels. 'We are rich men now; no more hard graft for any of us.'

Welldridge looked at the speaker and rose to his feet.

'That's true for you,' he said gravely. 'We need do little more work in our lifetime—thank God!'

He took his pipe from his mouth, and lifted his hat as he spoke, the others a little awkwardly following his example. There was a brief silence in the cave. Welldridge looked shy; the others, surprised at the gravity and intenseness with which the sentiment had been expressed, felt disinclined for speech.

Don McIntyre broke the spell.

'I'm glad you said that, Phil,' he said, holding out his hand.

It seemed as if the example was infectious, for presently they found themselves gripping hands all round; and it was curious to note how in the moment

of their unparalleled good fortune they found so little to say. Each man seemed lost in a reverie, from which he had no inclination to be disturbed, and there reigned for a time such a silence as made Don say, half seriously, half in fun :

'I don't wonder they call these cliffs the "Wings of Silence."'

'Let us go back,' suggested Welldridge. 'Pontifex will be wondering what has become of us.'

Once in the open air again, Charlie's temporary quietude gave place to extravagantly high spirits; he danced cumbrously along the rough hill-side, singing and shouting in his excitement; and Dixon, though having himself more under control, could not resist an occasional grotesque caper as he followed as closely as he could in his companion's wake. Welldridge and Don McIntyre came on more leisurely, but, in spite of the repression which they endeavoured to put on their feelings, they were both intensely moved at the magnitude of their good fortune.

'Well,' said Joe Pontifex, looking up as Charlie pulled up after a headlong race down the last portion of the hill, 'are you satisfied?'

Charlie capered round him like a madman.

'Satisfied!' he cried—'my Gow!'

He could not stand still and reply to Joe's questions, but moved restlessly from one spot to another.

'They're coming,' he said presently. 'Coee-ee-ee! coee-ee-ee! coee-ee-e-e-e!'

'Oh, sit down!' commanded Joe, half laughing and half in earnest. 'Can't you keep still?'

'No,' said Charlie shortly, 'I can't—and I ain't going to try. I must move about, or go off my nut!'

He continued his absurd antics until the others came up, and then Welldridge packed him off for a supply of roots, while the others all lent a hand to prepare an extra good dinner to celebrate the event. After the meal was over and the pipes lit, Joe told them what he knew of the treasure.

'It was Clem Hay who found the cave, and he also found the skeletons.'

'The skeletons! What skeletons?'

'I don't expect you noticed them; they are really only a couple of piles of bones on a shelf, or ledge, in the tunnel. Clem was hunting after a lizard, as I told you, and squeezed in after a big one, which went behind the rock; of course, finding no resistance when he poked his stick to the left, we levered the rock out a bit with poles. Well, he went in alone, while I stopped behind, ready to bash the lizard if it came out—it was an extra large one, and we were keen on getting it. Of course, up to that time we had no idea of there being any extensive excavation, and as Clem did not return for some time, I was

getting uneasy, when suddenly he came out with a bone in his hand, and directly he saw it in the daylight he gave a start.

'It was a human skull, and I can tell you it gave us the jumps for a minute; but presently we got a torch rigged up and crawled in. Clem went first, and got to the cave, climbing right over two skeletons, one of which was lying near the opening of the tunnel, and the other half in the other end and half in the cave. I crawled in after him, and we inspected the cave roughly, but did not notice the treasure then, as the torch began to fizzle out. We made two or three torches when we came out, and as we did not like crawling over the skeletons, we lifted them on to a ledge that runs about a foot from the floor; you would not notice them unless you looked for them, I expect.

'Well, when we had disposed of the bones we crept into the cave again, thinking it would make a good sleeping-place in the hot nights, and then we discovered the contents. You can guess how we felt. We had been working like niggers at the claim, and got good results; but this find made our little pile look ridiculous. Of course, I wanted to load up the stuff and clear out for civilization straight away; but Clem had got some infernal idea into his head about these remains, and nothing would stop him from hunting and digging and fooling about for some clue

to their identity; and though we loaded up the camel-packs with precious stones and a few of the biggest nuggets, we stayed on for three days.

'The third day, when I was sitting up there on the plateau, and in a rage with him for wasting time, he came out with a dirty little round piece of tin in his hands, two battered pannikins, and an old rusty knife. He sat down right in front of me, and began scrubbing, and rubbing, and cleaning the wretched things, and looking at them through his digger's magnifying glass, till I fairly got my wool off. But he was a curiously obstinate beggar, and there he sat poring over these things until at last he got a clue.

'"They were Chinamen," he said, holding the round piece of tin toward me—"you can see the Chinese characters on the tin; and this was the back of one of those little round looking-glasses that are so common amongst travellers." And then——'

'Well, never mind what happened then,' interposed Don McIntyre quickly. 'You are not to refer to that—you won't if you value your health.'

'Well, that's about all I know, except that the——'

'H'sh!'

'Well, that Clem shoved me over the cliff, and you found me lying there like——'

'Oh, we're going back at last to the old countree!'

sang Don, interrupting him.

'Oh, the miles! oh, the miles!
That we've humped the blessed blue,
And the tears and the smiles,
And the troubles we've gone through!
Oh, the nights by the fires,
And the yarns we used to pitch
Of our hopes and desires
If we ever should get rich!

'Chorus, all of you:

'But we're off! oh, we're off!
No more toil for you and me;
Oh, we're going back at last to the old countree!'

CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE TRACK.

On a cold rainy day in December three well-dressed gentlemen, newly arrived from Australia, were dining privately in a well-known hotel in the West-End of London.

'It is strange,' said one of the trio, a dark, strongly-built, determined-looking man, 'it is strange how little London has altered in all these years. I can remember dining here the last time I was in England, and nothing seems changed—the same proprietor, the same furniture, the same dismal, sloppy scene outside, and the same ubiquitous waiters inside.'

'Ah,' said one of his companions cynically, 'if they had known *you* were coming, they would have arranged differently—had the place illuminated and the bells ringing.'

'Ha, ha!' laughed the third man boisterously.

'Now look here, Mr. Driver,' said the first speaker, turning round with a twinkle in his eyes, 'you seem to forget that you are now a wealthy man, a person of note, and expected to behave as such. A gentleman of your illimitable wealth does not permit himself to laugh in that boisterous manner, especially at a feeble little joke such as Pontifex's; a slight depression of the lips—so—is all that is necessary to prove that you have sufficient brains to perceive the attempted witticism, while your intellect disdains to acknowledge it as worthy of further appreciation.'

Charlie looked crestfallen and puzzled.

'I thought rich men like me and you and Pontifex could do most as we liked,' he said presently, scanning the Doctor's face suspiciously.

'Ah, that is one of the common errors of the lower classes, my good sir. Men like me and you and Pontifex—I am only copying your own phrase in placing myself first—are now, through our wealth, placed upon a giddy height, from which the common herd can see and criticise our every action; and for the good name of our order, I ask you, Mr. Driver, do you think that we should do anything to lower the intensely high opinion which that order has gained and held for so many hundreds of years—ever since your ancestor, Charles le Thumper, came over with William the Conqueror in the days of old,

before bicycles were invented and woman's rights were dreamt of?'

Charlie's eyes grew rounder and rounder as the Doctor proceeded, and he moved uneasily on his seat.

'Are you boraking, Doctor?' he said timidly.

'Sir! do you think that upon such a topic I could condescend to *borak?*'

'I don't see as my money puts me on any giddy height, not more than I was before; and as for the common people, I am as common as most, I suppose; I never pretended to be anything but a common chap, and what's more, I won't,' he added doughtily. 'I believe you are taking a rise out of me again—isn't he, Pontifex?'

'Of course he is, you ass! He's jealous because he couldn't think of anything to cap my witticism with.'

'Your what?' said McIntyre scornfully.

'Well, but look here, Doctor,' pleaded Charlie, 'you might give a fellow a show. I'm getting that nervous I never know when you're poking borak and when you're speaking plumb.'

'It was a bit too bad, Charlie, and you are a good fellow. I am ashamed of myself; but the fact is, my spirits are rising rapidly. It *is* something to be back in this foggy, wet, busy London, after all; the very smell of the fog seems pleasant to me . . . And to know I am actually a wealthy man, and at liberty to do some good in my time! . . . I dare say

you do not understand me, but I'm excited and happy, and that's a fact.'

Charlie nodded cheerful forgiveness, and went on with his meal.

'About our plans, Joe,' said McIntyre presently. 'I have no relatives, and only few if any friends whom I can rely upon a welcome from. Practically my time is my own; I have no duty visits to pay—indeed, no visits at all until I feel an inclination that way, for after all these years a week or two will not matter, so I propose stopping in these quarters for a while and pottering about, picking up the threads of my old life when I come across them; in fact, I mean to loaf for a week or two without making any definite plans. You, I know, have domestic affairs to see to, and as Charlie, like myself, has nothing definite to do, I think he had better put up with me for a while, and I will initiate him into some phases of London life—that is, if you will trust yourself in my hands, Charlie?'

'You bet your life!' exclaimed the bullock-driver earnestly; 'I'd sooner hump my swag from Beltana to Palmerston than knock about this blessed township by myself.'

'London, my dear Charles, is not usually called a township; in point of fact, its citizens consider it large enough to be styled a city; still, that's a matter of taste.'

'Oh, hang the taste!' said Charlie; 'I wish you'd stop poking borak at a fellow. How the devil do I know how big the place is! I haven't seen anything but one street, full of umbrellas and cabs, and mud and rain, anyway.'

'But I say, McIntyre, why couldn't you and Charlie come down with me? There's plenty of room in the Vicarage, and my people would be delighted to see you both.'

'But, my dear fellow—family reunion and all that, don't you know. Charlie and I would only be in the way; still, if you want us, we might go down with you, and put up at a hotel for a day or two, or we might stay on here, and run down later. . . . Do they know you're coming?'

'No; that's partly why I wish you'd come . . . they may be dead for all I know.'

'If you mean that we would be useful to you, Joe, we'll go in a minute, if that is so. Will you come, Charlie?'

'You bet!' said Charlie quickly. 'I'd like to stick to you two chaps till I get the run of the townsh—— city a bit. You see,' he added, 'I might get bushed if I camped away from you fellows.'

'I know a girl who will just *love* you, Charlie,' said Joe, laughing. 'She's a pretty girl, too, so you'd better look out, old fellow.'

Charlie blushed all over his round, jolly face.

'Oh,' he said humbly, 'I ain't such a fool as to think any of the people *you* know would care about the like of me. I know pretty well, now, how they feel. They say "How d'ye do, Mr. Driver?" to my face, and "There's that damper-head colonial bullock-thumper!" behind my back.'

'The girl I mean will say what she has to say to your face; I'll promise you that, Charlie. But perhaps she's married.'

The Doctor sent for a Bradshaw in order to consult the train time-tables.

'Here you are, Joe,' he said; 'can't go down to-day. Let us wait till the early morning train, and look in at the theatres to-night, eh?'

'I don't feel much on; still, we may as well do that as anything.'

The trio had a pleasant enough evening, and left next morning early for Orminster. As the train flew rapidly onward, Joe became more and more restless.

'Here's Bristol,' he said as the train slowed up; 'how slow they are!'

'Slow, man! Why, it's one of the fastest lines in England; it's the express,' said McIntyre, noticing and sympathizing with his comrade's mood, and feeling a sense of separateness and loneliness as he compared Joe with himself.

Joe tried to read the papers and magazines which

they had purchased, but without avail, the words had no meaning for him; his thoughts flew ahead of the train and nearly drove him frantic with impatience.

How long he had been away! What changes there must be! He leaned his head back against the cushions and shut his eyes as his imagination suggested picture after picture of his home-going. Ethel would be at the Vicarage gate, or perhaps in the garden. His mother would see him coming up the steps and wonder who he was. His stern father would perhaps ride past him in the road—his tall, gentlemanly, clerical father, with his clean-shaven healthy face, his clear, penetrating eyes and determined mouth. Joe conjured him up, riding slowly down the street, sitting erect and square on the old roan cob. No, not on the old roan—he must be dead by now—but on another just such a sleek, strongly built, respectable animal. No, not the roan cob whose mane he remembered 'hogging' ever so long ago, and the beating he got for it, and how the people used to laugh, and how his mother cried——

'Thank goodness!' muttered Don to himself as he saw the brown head fall back in the cushions and the strong, lithe figure slowly relax; 'he's asleep.'

They sat and watched his restless slumber; sometimes a smile flitted over his lips, and his hands

unclosed; again, a shade of grief or anger clouded his face, and his lips tightened, while the deep line between his brows grew deeper still.

'It's like watching him up at the "Wings of Silence," Doctor,' said Charlie softly. 'Do you remember?'

The Doctor nodded, and looked pityingly at the sleeper.

'He's a hard nut in some things,' he said slowly, 'very hard; but if he wasn't so hot-tempered he would be a grand fellow.'

'You've got a touch of that yourself, Doctor, I reckon,' retorted Charlie with a grin.

Don gave him a humorous glance.

'If you get taking my character away amongst these ladies we are going to visit, I'll lay you out, Charlie.'

They were staunch friends, these two. Charlie admired and reverenced McIntyre for his learning, his many-sided character, his strength and pluck; and the Doctor had a warm feeling for his simple-minded companion, whose cheerful good-nature and willingness had lightened many a weary hour; and he could not but be proud of the dog-like fidelity which Charlie had for him, and took no pains to hide.

The train rolled on and on, until at last Joe's slumbers were disturbed by his companions' voices.

'Wake up, Joe! Joe! This is Orminster, man! Hurry up!'

Half asleep, and still hardly out of dreamland, Joe opened his eyes.

'Orminster!' he said sleepily.

Don gave him a vigorous shake, and clapped his hat down upon his head.

'Yes, Orminster. Wake up, man, and tell us what to do.'

After so many years there had been many changes in the little Somersetshire station, and for a moment or two after they had stepped outside, Joe could not recognise his whereabouts.

'Cab, sir? Cab, sir?' shouted the cabbies, crowding round them.

'Here—you! take this luggage—it's not much—to the Orminster Arms; we will walk.'

When the cab rolled away with the luggage, the three men strolled along slowly.

'What a rum fellow you are, Joe!' said Charlie presently. 'You were mad to get here, and now you're walking as slow as a blooming funeral—and you might have had a cab!'

'Oh, it's better walking,' McIntyre interjected with a frown at the speaker; 'we need to stretch our legs after that long railway journey, and it's not far I suppose, Joe?'

'Just over the hill; you'll see Orminster in a

minute; it is altered a good bit about here,' Joe said anxiously; 'but that is the effect of the canal not being used now, I suppose. There's Orminster.'

As he spoke, they came to the crest of the little hill, and Orminster lay at their feet. Joe stopped and took a long comprehensive glance around.

'There's not much changed in the old place,' he said with an air of relief; 'after all, ten or eleven years is not such a terrible long time.'

They walked down the High Street, the cynosure of many curious glances, and down past the Bank and the old-fashioned hostelry; the shops, and the ancient market-place, with its massive gates and curious carvings; up again on the opposite rise past Love Lane and the old Watch Tower, and on still further to where the houses grew fewer and further between, till on the crest of the hill they came upon the old gray church, with its tall, slender spire and curiously-fashioned roof, the ridge of which seemed like an inverted saw; a few steps further on, and they were at the Rectory gates, and Joe, leaning his arms upon the railing, looked eagerly toward the house.

'Here's a man coming up the hill, Joe,' said McIntyre, after waiting a few minutes in silence. 'Won't you ask him how your people are? There may be some changes, you know, old fellow.'

'You ask,' reply Joe gruffly, without turning his head.

'*Pontafaix!* Ay! ay! to be zure I know 'n. They be agaan to Lunnon mor'n six months ago. My zun Gaarge be t' gard'ner there,' the old man said, mopping his face with a great coloured handkerchief, and pointing towards the Rectory.

'London! What took them to London?' demanded Joe, without turning round.

'T' train, to be zure,' said the old man, with a grin.

'Are they well?' interposed McIntyre.

'S' far's I know they be; mortal rich they be now! Young Joe, he's made a zight o' money in furrin paarts—oh, ay, a zight o' money, zure enuf! Pity t' oud passon be dead.'

Joe turned round as the man spoke.

'Dead! Who lives here now, then?' he said sharply. The old man frowned and looked closely at him, mumbling his old jaws and scratching slowly at his stubbly chin in silence. 'Who lives here now, John Broomhall?' Joe cried again.

'You be young Master Joe, that's who *you* be!' the old man said, with a momentary spark of interest in his dull old eyes. 'Old John Broomhall, you says, so you did,' he muttered, letting his voice trail off into an indistinct whine.

'Who lives here?' demanded Joe angrily.

'You be Maister Joe Pontafaix, most cert'nly you be,' the man replied admiringly. 'I reck'n you know t' ould Passon Varrow lives there z'well's I do.'

Joe started.

'Mr. Varrow! Is he Rector?'

'Ya—as, he be, as you do know, Maister Joe, and his maad be along o' you 'n' your mother. She be up to London along wi' you. You know'd *that*, I reck'n! Folks zay as you've lost your mem'ry like—eh, Maister Joe?'

'Go to the devil!' said Joe fiercely.

There was something in his look which impelled the old man to continue his journey, and he hobbled along, stick in hand, muttering to himself as he went:

'Lost 's memory raight enuf, has young Maister Joe; but he've got his temper just t' same, most cert'nly.'

Joe watched him as he hobbled down the opposite slope, and then, turning to his companions, said in a low, concentrated tone:

'Will you two go back to the hotel and wait? Mr. Varrow is an old friend. I will come down by-and-by.'

They left him at once, and he went straight up to his old home, so little changed, save that everything seemed older and smaller, that he could scarcely believe but that presently he would see his mother sitting at the window of her little workroom, and hear his father's imperative voice calling to him from the hall-door to give an account of himself.

The Rector was at home, and Joe was taken straight to him.

'He's got his wool off properly!' said Charlie a few hours later, as, standing by the window of the room they had engaged at the hotel, he watched his mate striding along the street, shouldering the people right and left, without noticing the angry glances and rough words which were hurled after him by several aggrieved pedestrians.

'I've heard a nice story!' thundered Joe, bursting into the room and throwing himself heavily into a chair. 'That d——d blackguard Hay, not content with attempting to murder me, and then stealing off with the treasure, has actually been *here* and passed himself off as *me!* Taken my mother and sister and brother, and the girl I was engaged to, to some place in the country—a place bought with my money! Curse him! And everyone of them believes he's me! My oath,' he cried, with a fierce thump on the table that set the decanters and tumblers rocking, 'I'll have a day of reckoning with him!'

'But,' said Don presently, 'surely he could not deceive *your mother?*'

'He has, I tell you!'

'How could he, man?'

'Oh, fast enough! I dare say she was glad enough to believe it when he came home with a lot of money!' cried the infuriated man, clenching his fist and drumming excitedly on the table.

'Do you know what I think?' asked Charlie slowly. Joe stopped drumming, but made no reply. 'I think you're no white man—there!—to talk of your mother like that!' said Charlie, flushing scarlet at his own daring.

'Go to blazes, you fool!' the other said contemptuously; 'and mind your own business.'

'How do you know it's Hay, though?' asked McIntyre, who stood smoking in front of the fireplace.

'Know! why, he's the image of me! Curse him! Besides, this fellow is deaf, they say, and you know Hay is as deaf as a post in one ear.'

'But what earthly object could he have?'

'How should I know! Some rascally business—sure to be.'

'Hay may be exactly like you; he may have found out your people by the aid of the Directories. But how in thunder *could* he pass himself off as you? Why, the simplest reference to your boyhood would bowl him out.'

'Oh, he's cunning; he's told some cock-and-bull story of having lost his memory, for one thing; says he was ill, and forgot everything. A lot of d——d lies! That's what that old fool Broomhall was jawing about. Don't you remember? Besides, up at the "Wings" of a night I used to spin yarns about my people and myself. He used to pretend to be

interested, the blackguard! — talked about never having known a mother's love.'

'I can't see what object he could have. Any clue to where he is?'

'Yes; he's bought Knottoak in Kent, a regular splendid old place, quite a show place. I wonder how the dirty Colonial manages to ape an English gentleman.'

'You'd best leave the Colonials alone, mate,' Charlie interposed once more. 'I reckon I am a Colonial, too, and I ain't going to listen to that talk, not from you nor no one else! See?'

Joe stared at him angrily.

'You're getting a bit bumptious, my man; I reckon you want a lesson.'

'Guess you won't teach me, anyhow!' retorted Charlie defiantly.

Don motioned to him to be silent.

'What are you going to do, Joe?'

'Go up by the morning train. I want you two to come with me; the fellow's got cheek enough to deny my identity, I expect. He'll brazen it out.'

'There's no good in making a scandal. We will go if you promise to keep quiet and behave rationally; we are not in the Bush now, you know, old fellow.'

'By Jove! if we only were,' ejaculated Joe, 'I'd put a bullet in him fast enough!'

'Well, we're not there, and you must think of

your mother and sister, Joe; you *must* consider them.'

'A fine lot they consider me!' he retorted surlily; 'they say a mother can always recognise her own children!'

Don sat up late into the night, urging the returned wanderer to less aggressive action; and finally Joe allowed sullenly that he would keep his temper under control. Charlie, whose usual sweet temper had been ruffled by Joe's remarks upon Australians, and his strictures upon his mother and sister for being deceived by Hay, betook himself to bed at a comparatively early hour.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JOE'S REVENGE.

It was an unprecedently calm evening, the evening before the meeting with Messrs. Cowell and Linstock, and the drawing-room at Knottoak was ablaze with lights. One old-fashioned window, looking upon the terrace, was still uncurtained, and by it Mrs. Pontifex sat and watched the tall form of her supposed son as he walked slowly to and fro in the dusk, smoking, and striving to come to some decision as to his course in the impending interview with the lawyers.

Every fine evening the mother sat in a comfortable chair at this window and watched his after-dinner stroll, noting with pride his tall, strong form and handsome face. Every now and then he looked up at the window to nod in response to the loving look and smile which greeted him.

Mrs. Pontifex was almost perfectly happy now; indeed, had Joe and Ethel got on better together,

and Amy shown some sign of the old love, she would have had nothing left to wish for. But between Ethel and Joe the same trouble loomed, bursting out now and then in passionate rebellion on Ethel's part against her brother's coldness; and never since the night of her arrival had Amy treated her old sweetheart with anything but the most distant politeness.

Mrs. Pontifex was thinking over these things, and as the pedestrian passed below the window and looked up a little quicker than his wont, he caught a glimpse of the sadness on the old face before she had time to change her expression, and hastily throwing away his cigar, he disappeared through the hall-door and made his way to the drawing-room.

He walked up to her anxiously. 'You looked so sad, dear,' he said, stooping his brown head down to her white one, and looking tenderly into her face.

She drew his head against her breast as he knelt beside her, stroking his hair lovingly as she told him what her thoughts had been.

Outside, three dark figures had stepped on to the terrace and made for the hall-door; but one of the new-comers, attracted by the sound of music, and by the still uncurtained window, detached himself from the others, and approaching the open window, stood boldly looking in.

He beckoned to the others to follow him, and as

they looked into the room, the first comer clenched his fists and ground his teeth in fury.

'Do you see that?' he hissed. 'That is my mother! and there is my promised wife. The girl on the sofa is Maud Hamilton. I suppose the one at the piano is my sister. Just look at that scoundrel!'

'I suppose it's Clem Hay, right enough?' asked Don. 'I half hoped you were wronging him. But for God's sake, Joe, don't make a scene, man!'

For the other was rapidly losing what little control he had, muttering to himself and crunching the surface of the terrace in his angry movements.

They saw the man inside leave Mrs. Pontifex and cross over to the piano. As he passed Amy Varrow, she drew her skirts aside and looked away from him.

'*She* knows! By Gad! *she* knows!' shouted Joe triumphantly. '*She* knows the blackguard isn't me!'

Don McIntyre tried to clap his hand over the speaker's mouth, but a glance into the room showed him it was too late, for Mrs. Pontifex had risen, and was standing nervously grasping the back of her chair, as she looked towards the uncurtained window; the girl at the piano had ceased playing, and swung round upon the music-stool, looking inquiringly at the others; Amy Varrow, absorbed in her own dreamy thoughts, was the only undisturbed person in the room.

The intruders saw Maud Hamilton move towards

Mrs. Pontifex's side and the man they knew to be Clem Hay hurriedly leave the room. Almost before they reached the hall steps he was there, peering about into the darkness, holding a flickering candle with one hand high above his head.

Interloper and would-be murderer as Hay was, Don, as he looked at the strong, resolute young face, recognised even in the uncertain light of the candle that it was the face of a man who had passed through great tribulation. The likeness to Joseph Pontifex was undoubtedly remarkable; but in this man's face there was evidence of a deeper nature than Joe possessed, and there was something pathetic in his very helplessness to hear the sound of their approaching feet. Don felt as if he was stealing upon a sleeping enemy.

But he saw them now—three strange men in his domain at night—and his face changed its expression.

'Well?' he demanded, as they drew close to him and stopped.

Charlie had hold of Joe's arm, and McIntyre was slightly in advance.

'We want to see you privately,' he said.

Hay bent his head inquiringly.

'I am sorry,' he said, 'but I cannot hear well. Will you speak louder?—I am deaf.'

Don repeated his words.

'It is important,' he added.

Hay looked at him earnestly for a moment, then, apparently satisfied, he motioned to them to follow him, and, ascending the steps, led them across the hall, where three or four servants had now congregated.

He had just opened the library-door and motioned them in, when Maud Hamilton came from the drawing-room and beckoned to him.

'What is the matter? Who are those men? Your mother is frightened and upset.'

Her firm, clear voice penetrated to the half-illumined room in which the men were standing, and, themselves unseen, they watched her as she stood close under the hall-lamp.

'It is someone on business,' Hay answered hurriedly. 'Tell them not to be alarmed—it is only business.'

She noticed his face keenly as he spoke, and noted some new expression in it.

'I'll tell her what you say, but I know it's an awful cram—you are in trouble of some sort?'

He nodded.

'Yes, I am afraid so—some law business. But they need not know—not yet. Please do not alarm my mother.'

She went down the hall—a tall, strong, graceful figure—and as she opened the drawing-room door

waved her hand lightly to her host. He, with the lighted candle still in his hand, moved into the library, and, without looking right or left, closed the door after him and walked to the gasalier. As he lit the gas, and placed the candle on the table, he became aware of two fierce eyes fixed upon him, and turned. For a second he returned the gaze, then his own eyes dilated, and with an inarticulate cry he snatched up the candlestick, and holding it over his head, sprang forward. As he did so Joe Pontifex, mistaking the movement for an attack, struck him full in the face. The blow was a terrific one; all Joe's pent-up hatred seemed to have burst forth at once and lent additional power to his arm. Hay, dropping the candlestick, staggered backwards. Before anyone could interpose, Joe had flung himself upon his foe with the fierceness of a wild beast.

'You murdering hound!' he muttered hoarsely as he seized him—'you cowardly thief!'

Taken by surprise—bewildered at the sight of the man he had long thought dead, and dazed by the heavy blow—Hay made but little resistance at first; but as he felt the other's vice-like grasp upon his throat, he exerted his full strength, and strove to wrench himself free. Strong as he was, he could not in his position shake off Joe Pontifex's grip. They rose from the floor and then fell together across the fragile table, which snapped and crashed beneath

them in their fall. The whole incident was all so sudden that the men were on the ground before Don McIntyre or Charlie could interfere, but as the two struggled together Don sprang forward, and, calling to Charlie to help, exerted all his power to separate them. With the doggedness which characterized all his actions, Joe maintained his deadly grip on the other's throat, regardless of the pressure of the Doctor's strong arms. A momentary glance at Hay's face showed Don that he was in imminent danger of suffocation, and seizing a ruler which had fallen among the débris of the table, he hit Joe heavily across the wrists just as the latter gave a fierce twitch at his enemy's throat.

Under the blow Joe's hands relaxed, and Hay's head fell with a dull thud against the pedestal of a statue. Hastily throwing Joe from him, the Doctor sprang towards Hay and examined him carefully, while Charlie supported his head; beside them Joe Pontifex stood in the litter of the broken table, regarding the fallen man with lowering countenance.

'Is he hurt?' he said sullenly, as the Doctor let the white face down on Charlie's knees again.

'Hurt! yes, mortally, I am afraid. You hot-headed fool!' said Don, suddenly rising up and confronting him—'see what a mess you've made of it, all through your vile temper.'

'Oh, of course it's my fault! he didn't give me any provocation, I suppose?' Joe muttered surlily.

'Well, it's no good talking; go and open the door, and get some hot water and a pair of scissors and some towels; and Charlie, you help me lift him on to the sofa.'

Joe went to the door and opened it; as he did so, he saw Maud Hamilton cross the hall and called to her.

'Maud!'

She came up quickly, regarding him with a bewildered stare.

'Don't you know me, Maud?'

'*Joe!*'

'Yes; the other was not me,' he said ambiguously. 'He was my partner, and tried to kill me. I've half killed *him* now, and we want things . . . water . . . and towels . . . the big man in there is a doctor; come and get him to tell you what he wants.'

They had shaken hands as Joe hurried over his explanation, and almost as he finished she was by the sofa looking at the prostrate man.

'What is it you want?' she said to McIntyre.

He mentioned the articles briefly, and without lifting his head, went on with the examination. Maud, leaving the room with a light, quick step, went off to get what he had asked for. When she reappeared a little later, Don was steadfastly re-

garding the patient, and snatched the things from her directly she approached.

She stood by the sofa watching his operations, while Charlie clumsily supported Hay's head, and Joe Pontifex, with a gloomy face, looked on over his shoulder.

'Let me hold his head,' she said sharply, noting Charlie's clumsiness; and before the Doctor well knew what had happened, she had taken the bleeding head in her strong white hands and Charlie had retired discomfited.

There was almost a dead silence in the room for a while, and all eyes were fixed on McIntyre, but when he had done what he could, and placed the bandaged head carefully upon the pillows, Maud broke the silence.

'Is he very bad?'

'Very.'

'He won't *die*, surely?' she said anxiously.

'I do not know . . . it is a nasty wound, and a very dangerous place.'

'Poor Perkin! I am so sorry! Even if he did try to kill you, Joe, I should be sorry if anything happened to him now.'

'Poor who did you say?' asked Joe, staring.

'Perkin—Perkin Warbeck, don't you know—the Pretender.'

Don McIntyre gave her a glance of disgust.

'He is very near death,' he said sternly; 'it is hardly a time for joking.'

Maud flushed and her eyes fell beneath the rebuke.

'I did not mean to be unfeeling,' she said timidly; 'it was just a thought which came into my head.'

'It would be as well that he should be undisturbed,' Don said, addressing Joe. 'You had better go and see your relatives now, and as soon as possible arrange for a bed for Hay . . . it is impossible for him to leave the house to-night.'

'Better put him in the room he has always had,' Joe said shortly. 'Where is it, Maud? can you show us?'

She called a servant, and led them to the apartment which Hay had occupied, and presently the wounded man was carried gently in. Then leaving Don and Charlie, Joe Pontifex went down to meet his mother and sister and Amy Varrow.

Maud led him to the door, called Amy, and then ran away to let Joe tell his own tale.

'Poor Perkin!' Maud sighed. 'Somehow I always thought there was a mystery about him . . . and, oh, how Eth will feel!'

She sat in the deserted office, absently toying with her foot amongst the litter on the floor, until she guessed that sufficient time had elapsed for Joe to have explained the situation, and then she crept softly downstairs. She hardly knew how she expected to

find them, but the happiness she had looked for was not visible in any of their countenances.

Even in the first moments of his return, Joe had reproached them with having been so easily taken in, and in spite of the joy his mother felt there was a wounded look in her thin face, and the tears which fell from her eyes were not all tears of joy. Ethel had buried her face in her hands, and was sitting in a low chair in such a position that Maud could see nothing to guide her as to the girl's feelings, but the attitude was not a joyful one.

Amy looked the happiest of all, but the suddenness and greatness of the surprise had made her faint and ill, and she lay back in her chair white and trembling; only her large starlike eyes shone with a gladsome light as she bent them lovingly upon the wanderer. Joe himself stood awkwardly by his mother's chair, vexed with himself for having reproached them, vexed at the result of his encounter with Hay, and in no little pain from the blow McIntyre had given him, which indeed had temporarily crippled both his hands.

'You're a lively-looking lot!' Maud said as she scanned them. 'What is the matter with you, Eth?'

Ethel raised a flushed, tear-stained face, and looked at her reproachfully.

'Pooh! don't fret over that, you goose!' whispered

her friend, answering the look, and kneeling beside her as she passed her arm about her waist. 'Besides, poor old Perkin has been punished already,' and in as low a voice as she could manage she recounted what had happened. 'So you must not be angry with him for that, dear; it was honourable of him. Just think how hard it must have been not to take you in his arms and smother that pretty face with kisses!'

Ethel's flush grew deeper, and she hid her face again. She could recall one or two occasions when he *had* smothered the pretty face with kisses.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CONFESSION.

Clem Hay was reclining on a couch in the room of which he had once been the owner, but which he now occupied, as he told himself, only on sufferance. It was the spring-time of the year, and the room was sweet with the scent of flowers and shrubs; from the terrace below he could faintly hear the voices of the other inmates of Knottoak.

The only other occupant in the room was Charlie, the Bushman. They had been talking intermittently of ordinary topics, Clem longing all the time to ask direct questions about the family with which he had been so strangely connected, but fearful of showing his desire too plainly; he had only broached the topic casually, and his simple auditor had not guessed how the questioner had longed to hear even the most ordinary details of the home life in which he could never again take part.

'Do you mind the wattle-blossoms yonder?' asked Charlie suddenly.

Hay smiled faintly.

'Yes, I remember them; what made you ask?'

Charlie looked towards the open window and lowered his voice.

'I don't know,' he said shamefacedly. 'I've been thinking about them and the big white gums, with the sunshine squiddling down through the branches. I keep on thinking of them . . . I think I'll go back,' he added with a half sigh. 'It's a fine place, England . . . but I think I'll go back.'

Clem looked at him kindly.

'You're home-sick. I think I am, too; perhaps we can go back together.'

Charlie smacked a heavy hand upon the back of the chair. 'My Gow!' he said, 'I'd like that.'

He had sent Hay's thoughts on another tack.

'Yes,' he said, after a pause, 'I think we're both home-sick. I should like a good gallop after the cattle in the scrub again, or a busy day mustering, with the stock-whips cracking and the men shouting; the dust and excitement of cutting out. . . . I suppose a Bushman always wants to get back to the old life sooner or later.'

'I ain't going back to bullock-thumping, though,' replied the other. 'Not much! but I'll get a jolly little station of my own.'

They both fell into a reverie, and perhaps each of them had somewhat the same thoughts. Mingled with the desire for a whiff of the old life, there was in each man's mind a reluctance to leave the new. In Charlie's case the drawback was chiefly the loss of Don McIntyre's companionship; in Clem Hay's there were various feelings at work.

He had been so long now with Mrs. Pontifex, and had grown to regard her with such veneration and love, that the thought of separating from her—and in anger—was bitter to him; but doubly painful was the idea of leaving Ethel, the girl who, while reproaching him for his lack of brotherly affection, never dreamed of the passionate love with which he regarded her, and which he had fought so hard to hold in check. And yet he was certain, from what he knew of them, and from the few words he had elicited from Charlie, that both of them must hold him in abhorrence.

Presently the door opened, and Joe Pontifex came in.

'I've come to see how you are,' he said awkwardly.

Clem flushed.

'I am getting on very well. I shall be able to go to-morrow.'

Joe looked down on the bandaged head thoughtfully.

'Look here, Clem, I've been talking to McIntyre.

about the whole wretched business . . . he's got some of the story from Maud and Ethel, and between them and what Amy has told me, I reckon we understand what you meant . . . to atone, and all that . . . well . . . the long and short of it is that I'm willing to shake hands.'

He put his hand out as he spoke, and Clem grasped it cordially.

'That's all fixed, then,' continued Joe, seeing that his old comrade was unable to speak, 'and we'll say no more about it. I asked McIntyre to come up with me, but he——'

'Well,' said Don, 'he what?'

'Didn't turn up.'

'Well, I've turned up now; have you cried quits?'

Joe nodded, and Clem, holding out his hand to the Doctor, muttered:

'I've to thank you for it, partly, Doctor.'

'Oh, I didn't do much—only talked to Joe like a father. You see, we are none of us so immaculate that we can afford to throw stones at each other. You—accidentally, I am sure—nearly killed Joe. He, in turn, nearly killed you, so you are quits.'

'Did you ever kill anyone yourself, Doctor?' asked Charlie curiously.

Don hesitated.

'Since you've made up your quarrel,' he said, addressing the other two, 'I was not going to tell

you my story, but I've often promised Charlie that he should hear it; and poor old Welldridge, whom we buried away back at Andabarra Water, often asked me about it. . . . I have not spoken of it for many years, and if I tell you now, it is partly that you may know me as I am, and partly that it occurs to me that we three men, each exceptionally passionate and strong, may learn a lesson by comparing our own experiences.'

And so, leaning lightly against the window and looking out across the quiet park, Don McIntyre told them of the mad act committed in his youth. He touched slightly on his attachment to Mary Falconer, but in all other respects he told them his story without any attempt to vindicate himself.

'We had been drinking,' he said, 'and he played a foolish trick on me. As he ran back, shouting with laughter at his success, I seized one of his specimen bottles, and threw it full in his face. I knew what it was directly I had done it. I knew, too, that nothing could save his sight; for the eye was the special branch to which I had turned my attention, and Sir William Falconer had only recently failed to cure a similar case. I did very much what you did, Hay. I tried to alleviate the sufferings I had caused by devoting my fortune entirely to my victim. My lawyers said I was mad; but I had my way, and when I left England I was almost penniless.

It was something to know that the poor fellow, who was, I knew, terribly in debt, would be able to at least live free from pecuniary worry in future. It was the only thought which comforted me in the days which followed—and the nights. You cannot tell what the nights were. . . .'

'I think I can,' said Clem bitterly.

'It must have been bad,' echoed Joe thoughtfully. 'Is he alive?'

'Yes. I set inquiries afoot directly we landed. I had the reply only yesterday. They say he is well and strong . . . married, too; and, in spite of his blindness, not altogether unhappy. I wish I could believe it!' He came away from the window, and stood close to Clem Hay's chair. 'You see you are better off than I am, after all, Hay,' he said sadly.

They looked after him pityingly as he left the room.

'My Gow!' said Charlie; 'I am sorry I spoke about it.'

'He would have told us in any case, I think. . . . We seem to be three rough customers, Clem?'

Hay nodded.

'I am going away to-morrow,' he said presently. 'Do you think your mother or—or—anyone would say good-bye to me?'

Joe moved uneasily.

'Mother's angry, and that's a fact,' he said; 'you mustn't mind if she's a bit cool.'

'Oh, I know I deserve it. . . . Perhaps I had better not see her?' he asked wistfully.

'Well, to tell you the truth, I wouldn't . . . it's partly my fault. I was so wild when I came back that I reproached her for taking you for her own son . . . and I am afraid it has made her bitter. She is a sweet-tempered old lady, as a rule; but when she does get a notion into her head, she sticks to it, and that's a fact. She won't talk about you.'

Clem winced.

'I will go quietly,' he said, 'and not see any of them. Charlie is going with me.'

Joe started.

'What! you, Charlie? Why, you've been in England no time at all yet.'

'Don't care. I'm off; I'm homesick.'

'Why, what will the girls say?—they'll soon talk you over. You are a prime favourite with them. you know.'

'Ye—es,' replied Charlie ambiguously. 'But they'll soon get tired of me.'

'Well, wait till they do, then.'

But the ex-bullock-driver was resolute, and it was presently arranged that Hay should leave the next evening, and that when he had decided on the date

of his return to Australia, he should communicate with Charlie.

It was settled that Hay's departure from Knottoak should be as quiet as possible; and when the time came, even Don McIntyre did not know what was in progress; but the flitting was not destined to be effected so easily. As Hay came down the wide staircase, supported by Charlie's strong arm and followed by Joe, the drawing-room door was opened, and Maud Hamilton came out.

'Oh!' she said, taking in the situation at a glance. Turning her head she called: 'Dr. McIntyre, your patient is running away!'

Don was by her side in a moment, and began upbraiding Hay for disobeying orders.

'You must not go!' he said decisively.

'I am going. Let me go quietly; it is best.'

Don made an impatient gesture; but Maud came to his aid before he could speak.

'If you *are* going,' she said severely, 'you might at least say good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' he rejoined, holding out his hand.

But she put hers behind her with an indignant gesture.

'Good gracious! Can't you say good-bye to all of us?'

Clem looked at them as they stood around him. He yearned, yet dreaded, to enter the room, and for

a moment he stood irresolutely. Maud seized her opportunity and led him gently in, the men following meekly behind.

'Maud is always putting her oar into everything,' growled Joe, 'and mother will only cut up rough over it, I know.'

Clem walked slowly into the room, halting by the piano, where Ethel sat with her hands locked in her lap, Mrs. Pontifex occupying a low chair near her, and Amy being further away. Placing one arm upon the top of the instrument, and resting his head upon his hand in the attitude most of them knew so well, he glanced round.

'I was going away,' he said slowly, fixing his eyes upon Mrs. Pontifex's averted face. 'I did not mean to see any of you again—to make you more unhappy; but I think now I would like to say some few farewell words . . . to explain how things came about.'

He stopped and eyed them wistfully. Mrs. Pontifex was listening with averted head. Amy Varrow sat coldly attentive. Ethel had closed the piano softly and hidden her face within her hands, as she bent forward with her elbows resting on the lid of the instrument. Their looks were chilling, and he gave a little sigh as his eyes took in their various attitudes.

A bright, frank voice broke on his ear.

'Sitting is as cheap as standing, Perkin Warbeck!'

It was Maud Hamilton who spoke, and who came

with a friendly glance towards him, wheeling a light chair. He thanked her with a gesture, but declined the chair. Leaning on the piano with his left hand hollowed behind his ear, he went on:

'My father was a Queensland man, a squatter. My mother died when I—her only child—was born. Her death unsettled my father, and when I was old enough to go to school, he sent me down to Sydney, where I stayed till my education was finished. Except for the holidays, which I spent on the old station, I never saw my father, and knew very little about his affairs. When I went home for good, and began to look around, I found things were in a bad way. My father had long ceased to interest himself in the station, which was entirely in the hands of his manager. I began my home life in learning the details of station work, and for two years I was forced by the manager to do all the drudgery and unpleasant work he could find for me, under the plea of teaching me my work. Then my father died, and when his affairs were wound up, I found the station mortgaged for almost its full value. The stock when mustered were far below the station reports, and altogether the estate had been completely despoiled by the manager, who levanted during the investigation by the mortgagees.

'I had a small sum of money, two years' experience of rough work, and little else. With all its hard-

ships I liked the Bush life, and, leaving our old district, engaged myself as sub-overseer in the Far North, where I remained for a long time, saving money and fairly happy. . . . One season there was a scarcity of cattle in South Australia, and the manager of the station sent me overland with a large mob to dispose of in the Adelaide market. We did very well, and repeated the trip several times. The last time I was gored by one of the cattle when we were yarding them up for sale, and at my own desire was taken to the Adelaide Hospital.

'When I was convalescent I wrote to my old manager, asking him to forward the money due to me, and at the same time I withdrew my savings from the Brisbane Bank. I had been very saving, and had a considerable sum, and when it reached me I determined to have a good time. I went round to Melbourne and Sydney by sea, and spent a few weeks in each place. I met Welldridge for the second time in Sydney; he had previously been with us in Queensland at Carrawinnie. Well, I was young; I had a good cheque to melt down, and, like a great many other Bushmen, I lived freely and enjoyed myself. After a while, I returned to Adelaide—the prettiest, quietest, and most homelike of all the Australian cities, and began to make a few friends.

'Then I went to Perth and on to Coolgardie, and met your brother, Miss Hamilton. A young fellow

who had been staring at me came and tapped me on the shoulder, and called me "Joe." I did not know him in the slightest, and told him so. He appeared chagrined, and evidently disbelieved me, for he walked away angrily. A few days later I saw a man in the street so exactly like myself, even to the cut of his beard, that I stopped and stared at him, as he stopped and stared at me. I remembered the encounter with the stranger, and told my facsimile of it. He evidently knew all about Frank Hamilton, and laughed heartily at my story. The end of it was that, in accordance with the Bushman's usual habit, we two strolled off together to a hotel, and over our refreshment exchanged histories. I found Joe Pontifex a Bushman, miner, and, like myself, ambitious of making a fortune at a stroke. In a few days we had become fairly friendly, and often spent hours together, especially in the evenings.

'Well, I met with an accident in Coolgardie which resulted in my hearing being impaired; and, as it grew worse, I saw little of Joe, or indeed of any acquaintance, for I grew shy under my affliction. But one day Joe came to me with a story he had heard from a miner, a man named Caffyn, who claimed to have discovered an enormously rich alluvial field. It was situated far beyond any civilization, and in entirely unknown country.

'Neither of us believed in it at first; in fact, we

forgot all about it, and went to Broad Arrow prospecting together; but we had no luck, and came back to Coolgardie, and found Caffyn had died during our absence. I had enough capital to procure a good outfit and purchase camels, and finally we started for the place which you all know as the "Wings of Silence."

'You know, I suppose, from Joe how we prospered, and how I found the Chinamen's hoard in the cave.... I did not know that the men were Chinamen at the time, and I wanted to gain some clue to their identity, so that we might do something for their relatives. But Joe grumbled at the delay, and on the afternoon that I found the pannikin and looking-glass he was continually faultfinding. When I did bring out my discoveries, thinking he would be glad, he only swore at me and pitched them over the cliff. . . . I was angry and indignant, and we quarrelled. It was not a very big place, and Joe, after throwing the things down, was standing near the edge of the cliff. He made an insulting remark, and put his hand to his ear in mockery of my own attitude. I hardly know how it happened. I sprang forward and struck him in the face in my anger; the next minute I was alone, between the Wings of Silence—a murderer!'

He paused and glanced around, more wistfully still. Nothing but the loud ticking of the clock fell on the ears of the others; to him there was

total silence in the room, and his face grew sadder and sterner.

'Yes,' he went on; 'I felt directly that Joe was dead, and I dared not look over the cliff. How long I stood there, with my hand still clenched, staring out on to the darkening sandy desert, I do not know; it seemed years to me. . . . At last I roused myself and raced down the gully and over the lower ridges to the southward, till I gained the sandy desert, and skirted round the base of the range until I found him.

'He was lying huddled up in the sand. I felt his heart; it had ceased to beat. I called him by name; I chafed his hands, which fell from mine heavy and inert. . . . The moon rose, and came drifting over the cloudless sky. She seemed like some Divine messenger sent to detect my crime. . . . I sat under the great cliffs, holding my dead mate's hand in mine, and watching the shadows of the cliffs giving way inch by inch as the moon threw her luminous rays across the earth. . . . The light crept nearer and nearer; it fell upon the old stained wide-awake my comrade used to wear, and crept slowly, slowly towards me, till the friendly shadow of the cliffs was driven away; and I sat there, horror-stricken and afraid, as the beams slowly brought every detail of my crime before me. . . . On, on she crept, the pitiless moon! and lit up the dead man's face . . . a face so like my own a few hours before! but now white and

rigid, save where the dark stream of blood had left its horrible imprint. . . . I crept away covertly lest some voice from heaven should call on me. . . . I believe I was half mad with remorse and terror. I went back to the camp, and when the moon had drifted by, and the shadows lengthened beneath the cliffs, I returned and hastily dug a grave in the yielding sand. I tried to lift him in; the contact was too horrible. I caught hold of one listless arm and tried to drag the body; but a sudden repulsion seemed to possess me, and I drew back. . . . All through the early dawn I kept on trying to nerve myself to the task. At last a nameless horror seized me. The cliffs frowned down upon me, dark and menacing; the dim gray light of morning seemed like some avenging spirit as it came breaking over the eastern plain, and I fled from the place like one possessed. I must have loaded the camels and put the few remaining things upon them, and started southwards. . . . My first lucid remembrance is of riding over the interminable desert, with all the familiar things packed on the camels, and a dull remorse and despair eating my heart out. My life was a misery; I scarcely ate or drank. . . . I rode aimlessly southward, and when almost spent, fell in with some Bushmen searching for grazing land. They gave me directions for reaching the settled districts.

'At Port Augusta I was ill for a while. When I was getting better, I used to lie awake at nights and think what I could do towards helping Joe's people. It became a sort of waking and sleeping dream with me. At last I resolved to come to England; I knew where Joe's mother lived. I went to Orminster, meaning to find out how best to help them—prepared to confess my guilt if necessary. . . . I met the lad—young Jack. He challenged me as being his brother; I denied it. The lad led me to his mother. She . . . she came to me crying, and holding out her arms. . . . It seemed to flash across me all at once that perhaps this was the way out of it—the way to make them happy. I said I was her son. . . . For a little while I did not see the difficulties in my way. The first night taught me that I dare not stay in Orminster. I had piled lie upon lie to deceive them; I guessed I could not deceive others. . . . I came away hastily and got them a home far away from Orminster . . . the rest you know.'

He looked round once more.

'Good-bye,' he said; and then, as he turned to go, Maud Hamilton sprang from the discarded chair and laid her hand upon his arm.

'Joe!' she cried, her great eyes flashing and her mobile mouth quivering with excitement, 'Joe! will you let him go like this?'

Joe flushed.

'It's all true that he says; but we've shaken hands . . . there's no bad blood between us now, is there, Clem?'

Clem's eyes had wandered away first to the mother and then to the daughter's face. But the elder woman made no sign, and the girl's face was still hidden in her hands. Maud broke the silence.

'I should like to shake hands, too,' she said, holding out her own.

Clem took it gratefully, and then Amy's white face appeared at his elbow, and to Hay's surprise she, too, held out her hand. She had always been so small and white, and yet so determined, that he had never dreamt of her forgiveness, and now she was looking at him with quite a new expression in her large, violet-coloured eyes, and the delicate hand had given him quite a cordial grip.

With a hesitating step Clem moved to Mrs. Pontifex's side.

'I dare not ask your forgiveness,' he said humbly; 'but do not let me go from you in anger . . . I . . . have learned to love you.'

But the old lady would not look up; she sat quite still, gazing steadily at her hands, and Clem could see that there were tears falling on them. A sudden impulse prompted him to kneel and possess himself of the hand nearest him and imprint a kiss upon it.

She looked up then.

'I cannot bear it!' she said pitifully. 'Please go.'

He went direct to the piano, where Maud now stood with Ethel; he did not attempt to offer his hand, but the girl held out hers.

'I forgive you,' she said. 'Good-bye.'

CHAPTER XX.

DON'S WOOING.

It was the evening before Charlie's departure from Knottoak; two days before he had received a letter from Clem Hay, advising him that he was to sail on the fifteenth, and now the three companions sat together in the Knottoak snuggery for the last time. They had passed rather a quiet evening, and although Charlie hardly believed it, his impending departure had really caused the girls a good deal of sorrow. After the ladies had retired for the night, Don and Charlie accompanied Joe for a smoke in the snuggery which Clem had fitted up during his residence there.

'Come,' said Don cheerily, after they had sat some time silently puffing at their pipes, 'we are not under the "Wings of Silence," are we? Why don't you talk, you fellows?'

'Oh, we're all a bit out of spirits,' acknowledged

Joe. 'The girls are heartbroken at Charlie running away.'

Charlie blushed like a girl.

'Oh no they ain't,' he said dolorously. . . . Then, after a pause, he added, 'One half of me wants to stop, and the other half of me wants to go, and I don't like to do either.'

'Oh,' said Joe, 'it's no good sitting on a fence.'

'Like the rabbit,' laughed Don:

'"He was far too scared to run,
And he didn't like to stop,
And the fellow with the gun
Hit him flop! flop! flop!"

Someone will be hitting you flop soon, Charlie.'

'Gad!' said Joe mischievously, 'I believe someone has already; which of 'em is it, Charlie?'

But Charlie, colouring up furiously, refused to be drawn.

'Sing us something, Doctor,' he said. 'Sing "Soldiers."'

Don had his violin in the room, and without ado he tuned up.

'You may love the sound of organ notes,
Solemn, and sweet, and slow;
But the music for me comes from soldier throats,
As they cheer when their blazoned banner floats
In the midst of the hated foe!
For a soldier! a soldier! a soldier!
A soldier's life for me!

'Oh, the clank of steel, and the bugle's cry,
As the signal for charging comes;
The fiery flash as the sword-blades fly,
The wild, mad passion to do or die,
And the roll of the far-off drums!
For a soldier! a soldier! a soldier!
A soldier's life for me!

'Oh, the dancing blood, and the eager hands,
And the mad, wild lust to kill;
And the swift, short shrift in far-off lands—
What matters if never a headstone stands?
The regiment remembers still!
For a soldier! a soldier! a soldier!
A soldier's life for me!'

The enthusiasm with which he sang infected them, and they joined in the chorus so lustily that Maud Hamilton in her distant bedroom heard them, and crept down to Amy's room to listen. Perhaps Joe would not have been best pleased if he had known that the two girls sat huddled up on the bed listening to their voices.

'They never sing like that in the drawing-room,' said Maud, when the song ended. 'They must imagine themselves back in the Bush again.'

And that was exactly what Don McIntyre was proposing to his two companions, to imagine themselves back in the Bush again.

'Look here,' he said, 'it's fairly early, Joe; let's make a night of it, and give Charlie a send-off. We'll shove that table away, and sit round the fire

like we used to do in the Bush. You clap on the kettle, Joe, and we'll have some toddy first, to liven us up a bit.'

'You've got one of your mad fits again,' said Joe, laughing at him.

'Go to Hong-kong! Now, Charlie, shut your eyes to the gaudy magnificence of Joe's swell English home, and imagine yourself in the old wattle-and-dab hut, with the moon shining on the silver wattles on the hillsides, and the bullfrogs croaking in the lagoon—"the deep reed-fringed lagoon." Shut your eyes to these,' he said, pointing to the array of glasses and decanters, 'and imagine an old battered billy and three pannikins in their place. Now then, Joe, hurry up with the toddy! What shall we sing, Charlie . . . something about Australia?—

> '"Where gold lies hid and rubies gleam,
> And fabled wealth no more doth seem
> The idle fancy of a dream,
> Australia! Australia! Australia!"

I believe the lady who wrote that must have had *our* treasure in her mind's eye, eh, Joe?'

He rattled on from one topic to another, while Charlie listened to his nonsense with grave attention, and Joe leaned back in his chair and laughed softly.

'I wonder who wrote the song about Botany Bay. Do you remember it, Joe?—

'"The convict man, the convict man,
Came up from Bot'ny Bay;
The people for the bobbies ran,
But *they* had run away.
Oh! they had run away, my lads, as fast as they could slide,
And they didn't catch the convict man—because they never tried!

'"The convict man went bushranging,
And 'bailed 'em up in style,
And mighty small he made 'em sing
For quite an awful while.
Oh! some they ran away, my lads, and some they stood their ground,
But the bobbies never caught him—for he never could be found!"

I remember having a terrible row at Bundacowie over that song. I camped with a party of mounted police, and in the evening got out my fiddle, and without the faintest idea that they would take umbrage at it, I sang that song. There was a peppery young Irish sergeant in charge, newly promoted to the stripes, and simply spoiling for a row. He took it as an insult to "meself and me min," he said, and there was no pacifying him.'

'I expect you sang it on purpose,' said Joe.

'Oh no, I didn't; I've a great respect for the Australian trooper. Take him all round, he is a smart fellow, and in some of those northern districts, where the population is scanty, the amount of work that falls to the policeman's lot is wonderful. He

takes the census, registers births, deaths, and marriages, succours the sick, watches the sinful, jabbers to the natives in their own language, distributes the Government rations, acts as coroner, returning officer and the Lord knows what.'

'They ain't bad fellows,' concurred Charlie. 'Let's have "The Bushman" now.'

The other two laughed.

'Why, you never tire of that song, Charlie,' said Don; 'I believe you hum it in your sleep.'

But for all that they sang it again, and perhaps it was owing to the vigour which they put into it that the two listening girls caught the words, for one of them at least appeared to know them the next morning.

She had been gathering flowers in the garden, and was clad in a close-fitting, dark-blue dress, which showed her graceful figure to advantage. An old straw hat with a disreputable aperture in the top crowned her rebellious hair, and in her hands she held a cluster of newly-gathered blooms.

> 'Oh, the blue-bush, and the salt-bush,
> And the deep, reed-fringed lagoon,
> The sapphire and the camp-fire glowing red!'

she sang, as Don leaned out of the breakfast-room window and looked down upon her as she passed beneath him. She seemed to divine his presence, for looking up with a frank smile, she bade him 'Good-morning.'

'Did you hear me croaking your song?' she asked.

'I heard you singing it,' he retorted, 'and very sweetly, too. But you made a mistake in the words; it's "samphire," not "sapphire." I am glad I heard you singing that song.'

She made him a mock curtsey, and looked mischievously up at him from under the battered hat.

'Praise,' she said, 'from such a quarter!'

'Are you ever serious?' he asked sharply.

'Whiles I be, whiles I beant,' she replied in the Somersetshire dialect. 'I beant just now.'

She walked away as she spoke, but a moment later Don was beside her.

'Maud, I am not much of a lady's man; I have been too long in the Bush for that, but I want to ask you . . . could you . . . care for me? . . . could you marry me? I have wasted my time and ability in the past, but I am rich. . . .'

She drew herself up proudly, and looked at him with clear eyes.

'Sir, you do me great honour!'

He gazed back at her nonplussed. She had appeared to listen kindly to him at first, but now her eyes were ablaze and her cheeks white.

'What have I said? I have only told you I loved you, Maud.'

'Indeed, then,' she said, 'that is the very thing you haven't told me.'

He came closer to her.

'*Maud!* what is it . . . do you mean it?' he said suddenly as he caught a glance from her eyes. '*Maud*, my darling! I love you with all my heart; tell me if it is any good?'

'I don't know,' she said shyly; 'I can't read it.'

But Don was holding her hands tightly in his now, and bending down to look under the old straw hat.

'I won't take it from your lips,' he said; 'I'll read it in your eyes. Hold up!'

She did hold up her face, perhaps more shyly than she had ever done in her life; but her eyes were closed tight, and on her lips was a demure smile.

Down went the straw hat to join the discarded flowers, and Maud opened her eyes wide.

'I thought you said that you wouldn't take it from my lips.'

'Well, I've changed my mind, dear,' he said coolly. 'I'll take it again, please.'

'My Gow! you have got cheek . . . let me go.'

He loosened her as she spoke, but still held one of her hands.

'I want you to look at me, my darling, and tell me you will be my wife.'

She stooped and picked up her hat.

'Well,' she said, nibbling at the brim as she regarded him quizzically, 'I am looking at you, my——'

'What?'

'Dear Doctor, and I think I . . . will.'

'You will be the maddest pair that ever got married,' was Joe's comment when he heard of their engagement.

'My Gow, miss! you'll be as happy as the day is long, you and the Doctor. I wish I could stay to the wedding,' said Charlie.

But he had to leave soon after breakfast; Clem Hay would expect him at the station at eleven.

'It was a pity you didn't speak sooner, Doctor,' he said ruefully. 'I would have liked to see you a married man.'

'Oh, you'll see me in the colonies again one of these days, Charlie. Good-bye, good-bye!'

It was a never-failing source of delight to Joe Pontifex to watch McIntyre after the latter had announced his engagement to Maud. Mrs. Pontifex, Amy, and Ethel had guessed his secret long before; but to Joe it was a great surprise, and he made no secret of it, much to Don's disgust. It was perhaps as much to get out of the way of this rough badinage as anything else that he set out next day for Orminster to interview Sir John Hamilton. The baronet gave his consent readily, and the successful suitor returned to Knottoak jubilant.

'A nice life my Lady Mischief will lead you, Doctor!' Joe said with a grin the night after his return from Orminster.

'Are you afraid?' she asked him in a low voice as she caught the drift of Joe's conversation.

'I'm afraid of nothing, sweetheart, except that I am not good enough for you,' he answered passionately.

Joe was all for having a double wedding, but this Maud would not hear of, and Sir John being anxious that his son should be present at his sister's marriage, the date was fixed for August, about which time Frank Hamilton would return.

Joe's wedding took place at Orminster, and although Mrs. Pontifex was very thin and weak, she insisted on going down to the ceremony. Don McIntyre was best man, and after the newly-married couple had left for their honeymoon he made Knottoak his headquarters for some time, at Mrs. Pontifex's urgent request.

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTERWARDS.

August had come and gone, Maud Hamilton had become Mrs. Donald McIntyre, Joe and Amy had settled down at Knottoak with Mrs. Pontifex and Ethel, and the excitement which had been caused by the appearance of the real Joseph Pontifex had already almost died out.

It was impossible to prevent the story spreading, and for a while Mrs. Pontifex and Ethel had found the position almost unbearable; but now that the real Simon Pure and his wife had assumed their proper position, the elder lady began to recover her equanimity, and in course of time even to discourse without agitation upon the interloper whom Maud Hamilton to the last delighted to style 'Perkin Warbeck.'

But while Mrs. Pontifex, who had at first been so bitter, came after a time to speak gently of him and

recall his many good qualities, to deplore his deafness and speculate as to his future, Ethel, on the other hand, never mentioned his name except upon compulsion, and Amy, keen-sighted as she generally was, failing to discern the real secret of the girl's behaviour, grew to believe, with the others, that her sister-in-law absolutely disliked him; and as Ethel had grown very thin and pale, and the old sprightliness seemed to have left her for ever, it became an understood thing in the house after a while that all reference to Clem Hay should be avoided in her presence. And so the kindness and sympathy of her friends precluded her from listening to the one topic of which the girl had grown to acknowledge to herself she longed most to hear. In the solitude of her own room she brooded over the story of his motherless childhood, the misfortunes which attended his earlier manhood, the terrible affliction which had fallen upon him, the remorse which must have been with him constantly for his supposed crime in the solitude of the 'Wings of Silence.'

Sometimes, indeed, she found herself instinctively making excuses for his violence to her brother and palliating the deception he had practised on her mother and herself, and then again a flush of wounded modesty would flood her face as she remembered how she had, through his deception, lavished her caresses upon him, and told him of her secret

hopes and aims . . . and the thin face would grow rosy red as she remembered the little baby tricks and surprises which she had indulged in before him: how she had crept behind him and blindfolded his eyes with her hands; how she had tricked herself out in old-time finery and minced and postured before him in all the innocence of her girlish happiness.

And so the mental strife went on—one night finding her soft-eyed and wistful as she pictured Clem's misery in his banishment, the next leaving her with flushed face and indignant eyes, scourging herself with thoughts of occasions when she had kissed him, to be gently repulsed, or, possibly, to have her caresses returned in the shy, awkward manner which amused even while it vexed her; or, worse still, to remember those occasions when, catching her suddenly in his strong arms and looking into her face with passionate eyes, he had crushed her lips with hot, fierce kisses, leaving her trembling and ashamed.

But whatever way her thoughts turned, she was always conscious of a longing to hear of him, a restless desire to know whether, in the far-off colony to which he had gone, there was *anyone* to do the little errands which she had been so proud and happy to perform, anyone to help him over the hard places into which his deafness led him. She pictured him enduring the mortifications which she had learned to understand were so galling to him, and would wonder,

with a tender pity in her heart and unshed tears in her eyes, if sometimes, when the bitterness and loneliness came home to him, he would recall to mind the girl who had loved to screen his affliction from curious eyes, and whose pleasure it had been to be ears for him that he might hear.

But he had gone, she told herself, out into his new life beyond recall. She would never see him again—never have a chance to know him as he might be now that he no longer lived under the constant necessity of acting a part, now that he knew himself to be free from the brand of Cain.

The thought of him was almost always with her, as she sat brooding over the past, recalling the various incidents which had, at the time, seemed so incomprehensible, but which she understood so easily now, and like an open book she saw how the plot, which had seemed to him at first so simple and feasible, gradually grew more and more difficult to carry out. She knew that Joe, like many other rough men, had a strong disinclination to speak to outsiders of his womankind, and could understand how Clem, believing that his little world would comprise only Mrs. Pontifex and Jack, had persuaded himself that his suddenly conceived design was possible of execution. It was so easy now to understand his start of surprise and dismay, his awkwardness and timidity; but when her thoughts reached this point,

and she recalled how tenderly she had welcomed him, how she had commented on his personality and proudly proclaimed his good looks, the blood surged into her cheeks and her pity changed into indignation. And yet, even while the blushes suffused her face, she began to make excuses for him, to remember that, once committed to the deceit, he was compelled to carry it on, or own himself an interloper and murderer.

Mrs. Pontifex and Amy both noted the change in the girl, the gradual loss of spirits and appetite, but neither of them fathomed the true cause. She wanted cheering up, they decided, and so, in spite of her protests, the house was filled with visitors; her old friends the Clertons came for a lengthy stay, Jack brought two or three of his college friends down from Oxford, and, with Francis Hamilton and other friends of Joe and Amy, Knottoak became quite gay. But though Ethel moved about among their guests, and never complained of weariness or fatigue, it was patent to all of them that a great change had come over her.

At Christmas time Dr. McIntyre and his wife returned from their prolonged honeymoon, much to Sir John's delight. They had been away so long, and their wanderings had been so erratic, that Sir John complained, with some show of reason, that he never knew exactly where they were, for they adhered to no fixed route, but wandered about as fancy led them. After plunging for a few days into the delights of

one of the continental cities, from which Maud would write glowing accounts of their doings, they would suddenly change their minds as to their next stopping-place, of which Maud had dutifully advised her father, and direct their next letters from some obscure village in a different country.

They were absolutely happy, these two. Don found in Maud a kindred spirit, one in whom he could confide his aims and aspirations, and who could not only understand them, but discuss them with intelligence and vivacity; and her sound sense and judgment, her ability to strike straight into the heart of things, irrespective of sophistry or extraneous matters, was just the attribute which made her so fitting a mate for the sometimes visionary Doctor.

He had told her before their marriage of the cause of his self-exile, and the story enabled her to understand the occasional depression which had so often puzzled her. She knew how Don had stripped himself of almost all his worldly wealth in order to secure to his victim those comforts which money could buy. She knew, too, that he had through many a lonely day and night done penance for his sin; and when his story was told, she came close to him, no longer the off-hand, wilful girl who had challenged him with mock seriousness to confess the sin which weighed upon him, but a sweet, earnest woman, pitiful and sympathetic.

'Dear,' she said, 'I would not have you forget, for that would be to have you callous; but I would have you remember that it was an unpremeditated act—and it was the merest accident that the bottle contained so terrible a mixture. And you have suffered, Don, and made atonement. Remember it as a warning, if you will, but, dear, do not let it be a perpetual cloud over your life—and mine.'

He hardly knew her in her solemnity, but then, as Joe had often said, it took a long, long time to understand my Lady Mischief; and long after Maud had plumbed the intricacies of her husband's character, Don was discovering fresh phases in the nature of his wife.

Perhaps no two travellers were ever more popular than these two 'Bohemian sweethearts,' as one of Don's old friends dubbed them. Whether they travelled by land or sea, they made friends high and low. Maud's beauty, wilfulness, and contempt of conventionalities, coupled with Don's striking personality, varied and exciting experiences, his wealth and unfailing bonhomie, made them a noticeable pair in any company.

They had on one occasion, when staying in Berlin, attended a medical function, at which all the leading physicians had assembled, to hear the details of a recent discovery. Among the distinguished persons present Don presently observed his old acquaintance, Otto von Borheim, and as the German caught sight

of McIntyre at the same time, they managed to approach each other when the lecture was over, and Don introduced Maud to his old comrade.

'My own wife is here,' said Otto smilingly. 'I must bring her to you, Mrs. McIntyre.'

And presently he reappeared with a bespectacled lady hanging upon his arm.

'My wife,' he said proudly—'Miss Falconer that was.'

If he expected to discomfit Don he was unsuccessful, and Maud, who had heard the whole story, could hardly restrain a smile as she observed the ceremonious manner with which the new-comer welcomed them to Berlin.

'Oh,' she said presently, when the men were out of earshot, 'I know you were his first sweetheart—he told me.'

Madame von Borheim looked indignant.

'He was no sweetheart of mine,' she said; 'he asked me to marry him, and I declined.'

'Well,' rejoined Maud, 'I'm jolly glad you did.'

Francis had come back much benefited in health by his travels, and finding Amy out of the question, had transferred his fickle attentions to Ethel, much to Mrs. Pontifex's delight; and when, after a week at Orminster Chace, Don, his wife, and Francis returned to Knottoak, his attachment became so evident that Maud gave him some sisterly counsel.

'It's not a bit of use, Frank—she won't have you. You are only making it unpleasant for her, though she is too good-natured to say so. Go back to the Chace and help the pater with the estate for a while —you'll soon get over it, old boy.'

'Get over it!' protested her brother—'I shall never get over it. I never felt like this before.'

'Oh, nonsense! You've been in love with half a dozen girls, Frank. You know very well that you never do care for one more than a month or two.'

'But this is different. I feel as if she was just the sort of girl for me.'

'Well, she may be; but you're not the sort of man for her, so give up pestering her; she is not strong, Frank.'

Frank looked up indignantly.

'*Pester!* You are a nice sympathetic sister. I did expect——'

'Now, look here, Frank, she cares for someone else, and he is coming for her!'

'What, that impostor fellow!—that Hay!'

'Yes.'

'Do you mean that she *loves him*, Maud?'

'I am sure of it, old boy. If I was not, I would help you all I know; but you've got no chance. I ought not to have told you perhaps, but I am sure you will see that it is unkind to persist.'

'Does she know he is coming?'

'No—not yet.'

'How do you know, then?'

'He wrote to me.'

'*Maud!* Did you write and *tell* him to come?'

'Yes, Frank. It was for Eth's sake——'

But Frank impetuously flung out of the room.

'I'm off,' he said, with indignant reproach. 'But I did think better things of you than *that*, Maud—your own brother!'

'He'll get over it soon,' she confided to her husband later on. 'I am afraid he is incapable of a lasting attachment; and it is just as well that he is gone, for goodness only knows when Perkin Warbeck may arrive.'

CHAPTER XXII.

AND LAST.

When Clem Hay returned to Australia, he had brought with him the share of the treasure which Joe and the Doctor had insisted on his retaining, for they argued that, as he had found it, it was only fair that he should take his portion. Clem had wished to relinquish everything, to go back empty-handed to the land of his birth; but they had overruled his hypersensitiveness, and ere long he was glad that they had done so.

It had seemed to him that life could never again be fair for him, that by his own violence in the first place and deception later on he had thrown away his chance of happiness. He acknowledged to himself without reserve that he loved Ethel with a passion which was ineradicable; at the same time he felt hopeless of overcoming the dislike with which he persuaded himself she regarded him; and so, fully

convinced that for him there was no possibility of the happiness which comes to other men in the union with the women of their choice, he endeavoured on his arrival in Australia to interest himself in the station which he bought in the Southern Province. Here, on the banks of the Murray river, he had erected a beautiful home, and, by dint of lavish expenditure on irrigation, succeeded in transforming the wild Bush country into a fertile and pleasant land. One curious feature there was in the architecture of his home which seldom failed to attract remark; the building had two large towers near the centre, and between them, and almost on a level with their summits, was erected a look-out from which one could peer straight down upon the esplanade below, or see, close by, the white-stemmed gums which grow by the river banks, or, further out, the ridges of the distant dunes; occasionally, too, the busy, bustling little steamers as they plied along the river.

It was on this little plateau, or look-out, that Clem was generally found when the day's work was done and the sun had gone down; then, all alone, with no one to note his affliction or distract his thoughts, he sat and pondered over the past. Sometimes his memory mirrored a great frowning cliff of red rocks moulded into fantastic shapes, great wings beneath whose shadow lay an inert form. He saw

a wild-eyed man bend over the senseless figure in speechless horror, and raise his hands in agonized protest to the unlistening skies! Sometimes he saw a winsome English girl, full of artless fun, striving to lure a solemn, shrinking man, whom she called brother, to join in her whimsical fancies—saw the same sweet face clouded with grief and surprise. Sometimes saw—while his eyes grew dark with pain—the man standing alone in a brilliantly-lighted room, telling the story of his sin, and listening with dull ears that would not help him in his need for the sound of a forgiving word from those whom he had injured; but the bent white head of the woman he had learned to love and reverence as a mother is ever turned from him in cold unforgiveness, and the girl whom he loves with all the force of his nature looks at him with a sadness and shame of which he read the interpretation wrongly.

Sometimes, after standing there, dreaming his dreams and looking wistfully into the quietest Australian night, some demon of unrest seized him, and the stockriders, love-making with the station maids, would look up curiously as the tall figure, outlined against the sky, tramped restlessly up and down the narrow eyrie.

In his certainty that his banishment was irrevocable, his one chance of happiness absolutely forfeited, he had retired to this quiet spot, which, in memory of

that far-off place where the Wings of Silence brooded over the inhospitable desert, he had called 'Ilpaneen' or 'Folded Wings,' a perpetual reminder to himself that *his* wings were folded, his journeying done, and he tried to persuade himself that he was resigned.

But one day there came a letter from England which changed all his plans. It was almost like listening to Maud herself to read the crisp sentences.

'Come back,' she said; 'I know you love her. She is wearying for you, so come at once unless you want to break her heart. Don't shilly-shally or worry about being deaf, or being this, that, or the other. Just *come*.'

She would not have complained of his shilly-shallying had she seen him driving furiously a few hours later. Over bushes, fallen logs, stones, and ruts the galloping horses whirled the swaying buckboard, sending the browsing flocks and herds helter-skelter as they dashed across country in a bee-line for the nearest railway-station. Nor, had she seen him pacing the deck of the homeward-bound steamer, and counting the leagues which had already been left behind, would she have accounted him a laggard.

Maud had taken care to apprise Joe and Amy and Mrs. Pontifex of Clem's probable arrival, and the object with which he was coming; and though at one time Joe would have repudiated such an alliance

with scorn, his sister's health had become so bad that he welcomed any scheme which might bring back her cheerfulness and strength; and so, as Don McIntyre told him when he met him at Southampton, he had only to go in and win.

Like one in a dream, Clem accompanied the Doctor to Knottoak. Externally everything seemed to be the same; the very coachman who drove them from the station was one whom he had himself engaged, and the horses were a pair of which he had been very proud in the bygone days.

'Come on!' cried Don cheerily, as Clem hesitated at the entrance. 'Here's my wife waiting to welcome you.'

She came forward as he spoke with a pleasant light in her frank eyes and kindly words on her lips, and a moment later Joe and Amy also came to the hall-door and welcomed him.

'You had better come up and dress at once, Clem,' Joe said presently; 'we dine in about twenty minutes. Ethel won't be down,' he explained; 'she doesn't know you are here, and she has been too weak to come down-stairs lately.'

They had given him the room he used to occupy; and when he was ready to descend, he loitered for a moment at the doorway, looking back and noting how little it had been changed since the days when he had called it his own.

He was in evening dress, and, as he caught sight of his reflection in the glass, he started to see how extraordinary was his likeness to Joe Pontifex. In the distinctive clothes of everyday life the resemblance was perhaps less marked than in the sombre garb in which they were both now attired.

As he stood there, half in and half out of the room, there was a faint rustle which his dull ears failed to catch; but in the mirror he saw who it was approaching him, and as she came wonderingly towards him, he heard her voice.

'Joe,' she said, 'I thought you were downstairs.'

He had turned towards her now, and she faltered a little in her approach. What was there in his attitude that made her eyes dilate and the white face grow rosy red? He had not spoken, and now for the space of half a second they stood and looked into each other's eyes—she wondering, incredulous, excited, he striving with all his might to restrain himself, as they had told him it was necessary he should do lest the shock should be too great for her.

'Eth,' he said presently, 'little Eth,' and then he forgot all the warnings he had received and was by her side. 'Dear! I think you understand it all now? I loved you always, my darling, from the first day I saw you standing in the cottage doorway with the sun glinting on your pretty hair. I always loved you—not as a sister, Ethel, and that was why

it was so hard—I loved you as my sweetheart, dear. . . . Ethel, could you care for me like that?'

She was very fragile and weak; perhaps that was why, without waiting for her answer, he threw his arm around her waist and drew the shapely head against his breast and kissed her, and perhaps for the same reason he did not insist on a verbal answer, but after looking down upon her flushed face entered upon his reign with a command.

'Kiss me,' he said.

She lifted her drooping head from its resting-place so slowly that the tears trembling upon her eyelashes had time to run away and hide themselves in the flowers at her breast, and the quivering mouth to regain a little of its composure. Slowly, slowly, she raised it till her shy eyes looked into her lover's, and he bent down and met her parted lips.

'Sweetheart,' he began presently, 'you cannot tell how I missed your help after I went away.'

She gave him a tender look.

'Couldn't I?' she said a little sadly. 'I used to lie awake and think of you, and wonder who would help you.'

They stood for a few brief minutes exchanging confidences, and then Ethel started.

'The gong has sounded, dear; you must go,' and then, as he reluctantly loosened his arms, she said:

'Have you seen mother yet?'

She was quick to understand the slight shadow which passed over his face as he answered in the negative, and knew that he was nervous.

'Would you like me to come down with you . . . Clem?'

He looked so relieved that in spite of his protests that she was not well enough for the exertion, she returned to her room to smooth her tumbled hair, and then just as Joe was starting to look for his tardy guest the two came in together.

As he entered the room Clem could not but recall his last appearance there, and everything seemed so little changed as he glanced around.

'Ethel!' exclaimed two or three astonished voices.

And then Clem found himself walking with Ethel's hand clasped tightly in his towards Mrs. Pontifex. The old lady had risen, and as he approached her, with his hand half extended, he could see that she was almost as nervous as himself.

'Can you forgive me?' he asked, bowing his head to catch her answer.

She put her arms about his neck, and drew the brown head down to her own silvered one and kissed him.

'Yes,' she said simply.

And then, still holding Ethel's hand in his, he addressed them collectively:

'You all know my story. I think you all forgive

me; perhaps some of you guess how hard it was for me to carry on the deception. *You* know,' and he turned to Mrs. Pontifex again, 'how grieved you were that I could not give Ethel a brother's love. I cannot even now give her that, but I gave her long ago the whole love of my heart . . . and she has promised me to be my wife.'

He bent and kissed the girl at his side as he spoke, and then again addressing them, he said:

'When I remember . . .'

'Look here, Clem,' protested Joe, '*don't* remember; let's bury the past——'

'Yes,' cried Maud, interrupting in her turn; 'bury it for ever under "THE WINGS OF SILENCE."'

THE END.

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